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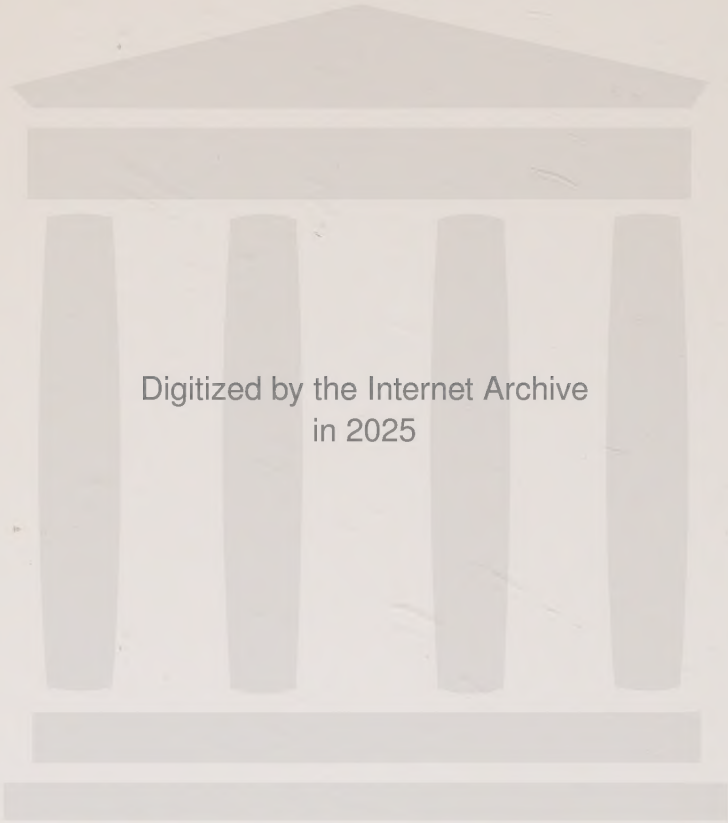
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OPEN CITY

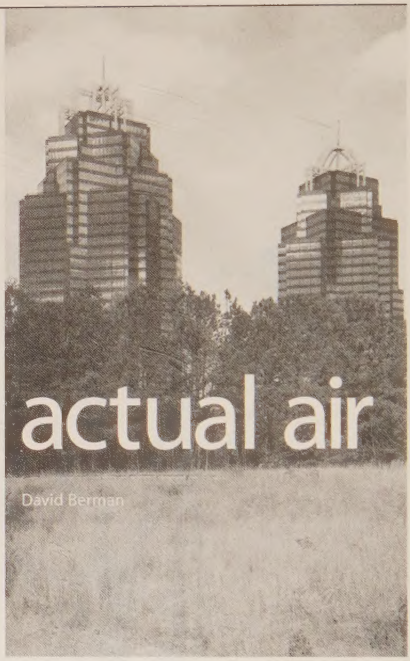
New York City, Winter 2010–2011
Number Thirty

OPEN CITY

Actual Air
Poems by David Berman

"David Berman's poems are beautiful, strange, intelligent, and funny. They are narratives that freeze life in impossible contortions. They take the familiar and make it new, so new the reader is stunned and will not soon forget. I found much to savor on every page of *Actual Air.* It's a book for everyone."
—James Tate

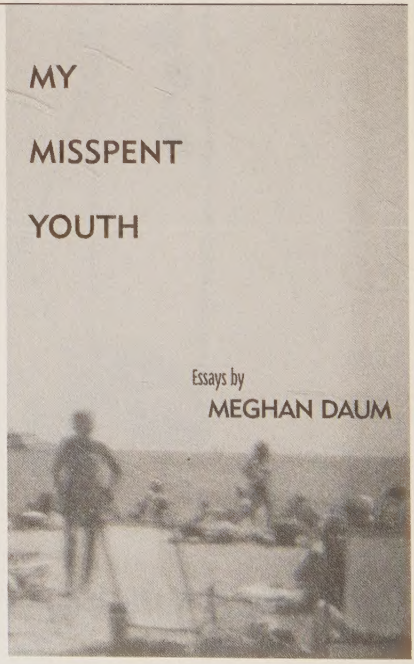
"This is the voice I have been waiting so long to hear . . . Any reader who tunes in to his snappy, offbeat meditations is in for a steady infusion of surprises and delights."
—Billy Collins



My Misspent Youth
Essays by Meghan Daum

"An empathic reporter and a provocative autobiographer . . . I finished it in a single afternoon, mesmerized and sputtering."
—*The Nation*

"Meghan Daum is not an eccentric exhibitionist or a self-indulgent memiorist. Her world is suburban New Jersey girlhood, Vassar, publishing, and the disillusionment that results when the reality of one's life falls short of expectations. Daum approaches the first lesson of adulthood—that the prosaic will intrude on the fantastic every time—without ever dissolving into cynicism . . . Undaunted, she chips away at the messy surfaces of life, desperate to find even a nub of authenticity beneath."
—*The New York Times Book Review*



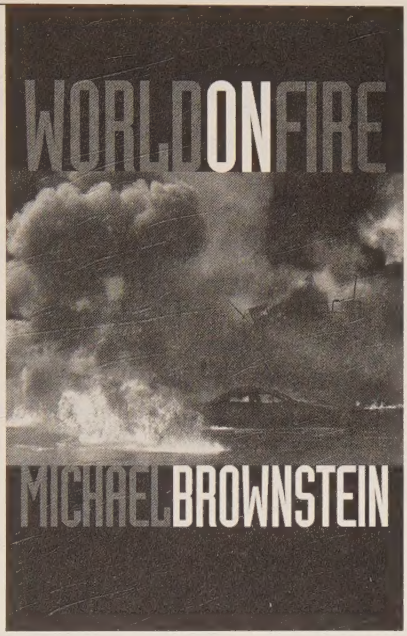
BOOKS

Open City Books are available at fine bookstores or at **www.opencity.org**, and are distributed to the trade by Publishers Group West.

World on Fire
by Michael Brownstein

"Bold and ambitious, *World on Fire* engages the great issues of the day, mixing the personal with the political, demanding attention be paid, continuing in the great tradition of Whitman, Ginsberg, and Pound. Here's a howl for the twenty-first century."
—Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*

"One of the most eloquent recent poetic works to cover the downsides of 'progress' and to cry out for a counterpunch against the manipulations of empire."
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

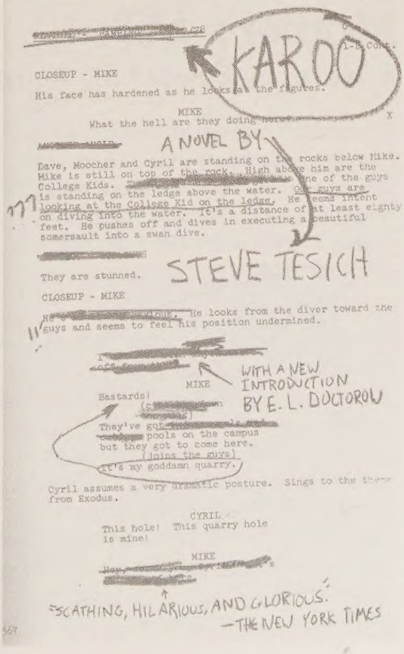


Karoo
A Novel by Steve Tesich

"Fascinating—a real satiric invention full of wise outrage."
—Arthur Miller

"A powerful and deeply disturbing portrait of a flawed, self-destructive, and compulsively fascinating figure."
—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred)

"Saul Karoo is a new kind of wild man, the sane maniac. Larger than life and all too human, his out-of-control odyssey through sex, death, and show business is extreme, and so is the pleasure of reading it. Steve Tesich created a fabulously Gargantuan comic character."
—Michael Herr



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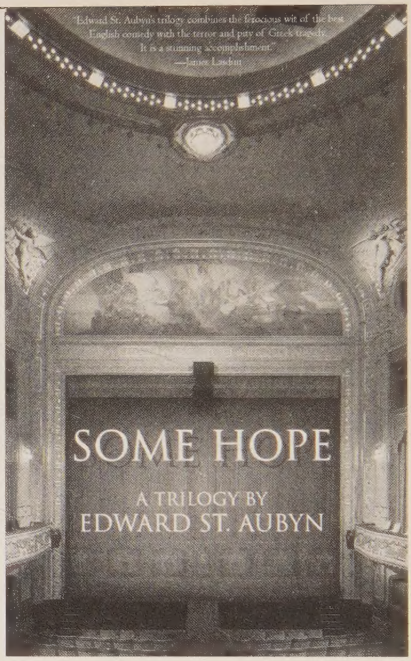
Some Hope
A Trilogy by Edward St. Aubyn

"Tantalizing . . . A memorable tour de force."
—*The New York Times Book Review*

"Hilarious and harrowing by turns, sophisticated, reflective, and brooding."
—*The New York Review of Books*

"Speedballs, incest, and royalty are just a few of things that make *Some Hope* exquisitely harrowing entertainment. Beyond the high-born squalor, though, is a saga of genuine wit and heartache."
—Sam Lipsyte

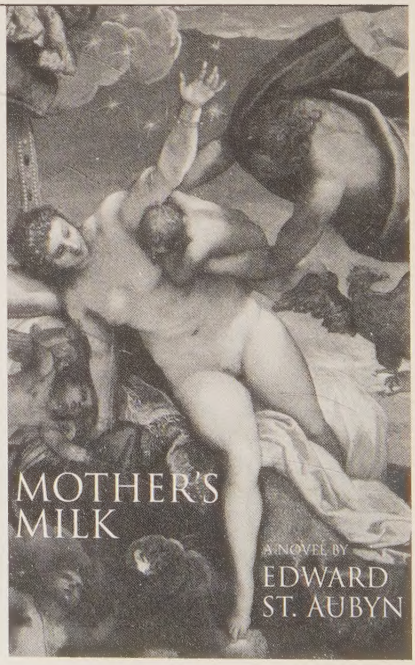
"An unlikely blend of Henry James and Bret Easton Ellis."
—*Kirkus Reviews*


"Edward St. Aubyn's trilogy combines the atrocious wit of the best English comedy with the terror and pity of Greek tragedy. It is a stunning accomplishment."
—James Lasdun
SOME HOPE
A TRILOGY BY
EDWARD ST. AUBYN

Mother's Milk
A Novel by Edward St. Aubyn

"Postpartum depression, assisted suicide, adultery, alcoholism—it's all here in St. Aubyn's keenly observed, perversely funny novel about an illustrious cosmopolitan family and the mercurial matriarch who rules them all."
—*People*

"Marvelous . . . What makes St. Aubyn so extraordinary and pleasurable to read is how beautifully he writes, his acidic humor, stiletto-sharp observational skills, and an ability to alchemize these gifts into one quotable, Oscar Wildean bon mot after another. [St. Aubyn is] the kind of writer who makes you notice the terrifying family at the next table, and who makes you want to write."
—*The New York Observer*



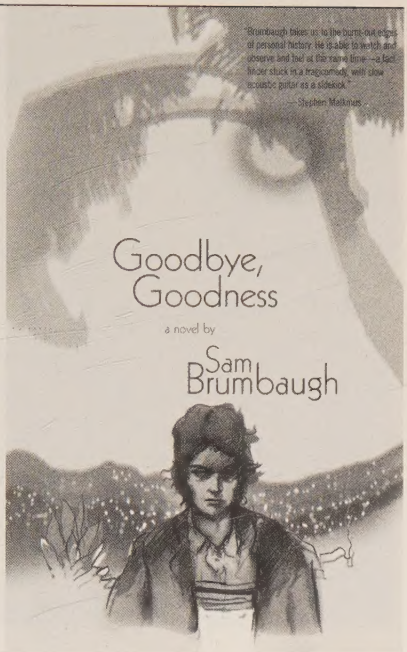
BOOKS

Goodbye, Goodness
A Novel by Sam Brumbaugh

"Goodbye, Goodness is the rock 'n' roll *Great Gatsby*."
—*New City Chicago*

"Sam Brumbaugh's debut novel couldn't be more timely. Goodbye, Goodness boasts just enough sea air and action to make an appealing summer read without coming anywhere near fluffsville."
—*Time Out New York*

"Beautifully captures the wrung-out feel of a depleted American century."
—*Baltimore City Paper*


"Brumbaugh takes us to the burnt-out edges of personal history. He is able to watch and observe and feel at the same time—a fast finger stuck in a tragicomedy, with slow acoustic guitar as a sidekick."
—Stephen Mallmus
Goodbye, Goodness
a novel by
Sam Brumbaugh

The First Hurt
Stories by Rachel Sherman

"Sherman's pared-down yet oddly poetic prose has the delicacy—and the potential pain—of a dentist's glittering probe. Even though her touch is light, when she hits the nerve, you flinch. [These stories are] sharp, smart, and able to deftly limn the subtle, shifting outlines of alienation and sorrow."
—*Bookforum*

"A startling debut collection . . . As in A. M. Homes's *The Safety of Objects*, the angst here is set in well-groomed places—developments, summer houses, manicured streets . . . Sherman's straightforward prose provides a contrast to her characters' unsettling behavior."
—*The Believer*

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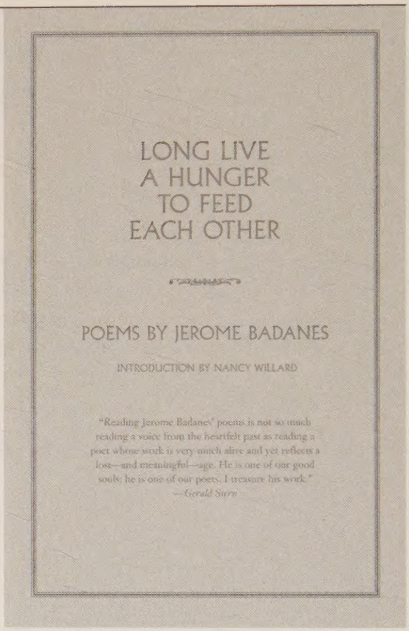
Long Live a Hunger to Feed Each Other

Poems by Jerome Badanes

"Reading Jerome Badanes's poems is not so much reading a voice from the heartfelt past as reading a poet whose work is very much alive and yet reflects a lost—and meaningful—age. He is one of our good souls; he is one of our poets. I treasure his work."
—Gerald Stern

"The best book publishing story of the year."
—*Poetry*


LONG LIVE
A HUNGER
TO FEED
EACH OTHER
POEMS BY JEROME BADANES
INTRODUCTION BY NANCY WILLARD
"Reading Jerome Badanes' poems is not so much reading a voice from the heartfelt past as reading a poet whose work is very much alive and yet reflects a lost—and meaningful—age. He is one of our good souls; he is one of our poets. I treasure his work."
—Gerald Stern

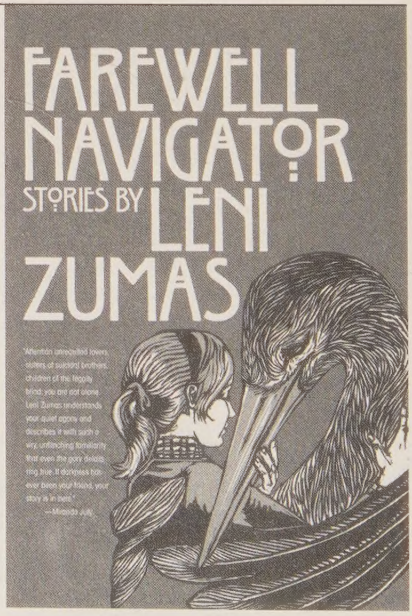
Farewell Navigator

Stories by Leni Zumas

"Zumas gives socially awkward, mysteriously gifted and self-destructive outcasts spell-binding, unflinching voice. . . . It's a powerful, irresistible collection."
—*Publishers Weekly*

"Leni Zumas's writing is fearless and swift, sassy and sensational."
—Joy Williams

"I have never read stories like these before and I can't get them out of my head. Her language is real sorcery—it dismantles the world you think you know and takes you to strange, fecund territories of the imagination."
—Karen Russell



BOOKS

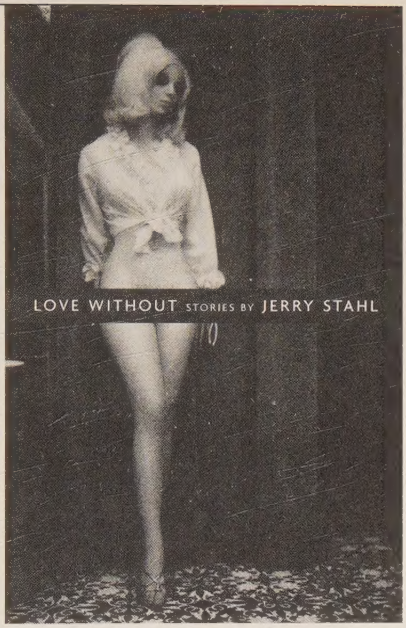
Love Without
Stories by Jerry Stahl

"Stahl knows how to shock us into laughter, and his best work mines the grotesque for pathos, a tradition that includes Flannery O'Connor, Barry Hannah, and Denis Johnson . . .The key isn't whom he writes about, but at what depth . . . Stahl plunges us into depraved worlds with a keen intensity of purpose, and his addled protagonists run up hard against the truth of their desires."

—Los Angeles Times

"Stahl's work is relentless in its search for truth. Not the gummy 'truth' of yuppie spirituality, but the grimy, snaking truth of empty bottles, prostitutes, and love in its various mutant forms."

—New York Post



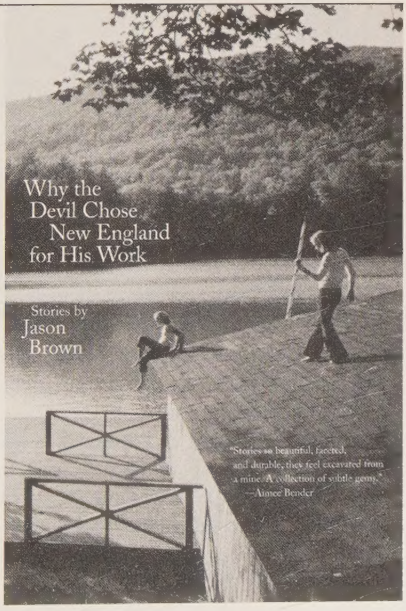
Why the Devil Chose New England for His Work
Stories by Jason Brown

"Links gem-cut stories of troubled youths, alcoholics, illicit romances, the burden of inheritance, and the bane of class, all set in the dense upper reaches of Maine, and delivers them with hope, heart, and quiet humor."

—Elle

"The inhabitants of Vaughn, Maine are stalked not by Stephen King horror but by intimate afflictions of blood, accident, and history, heart, and quiet humor."

—The Boston Globe

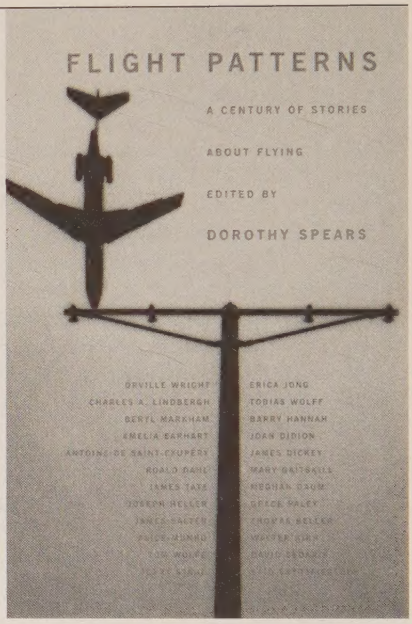

Why the Devil Chose New England for His Work
Stories by Jason Brown
"Stories so beautiful, faceted, and durable, they feel excavated from a mine. A collection of subtle gems."
—Aimee Bender

OPEN CITY BOOKS

Flight Patterns

A Century of Stories about Flying Edited by Dorothy Spears

This anthology of stories about air travel features writing by Orville Wright, Charles A. Lindbergh, James Salter, Mary Gaitskill, Tobias Wolff, Grace Paley, Walter Kirn, Alice Munro, Jerry Stahl, Antione de Saint Exupéry, Thomas Beller, Tom Wolfe, Joseph Heller, James Dickey, Erica Jong, Saïd Sayrafiezadeh, Roald Dahl, Meghan Daum, Barry Hannah, Beryl Markham, Mary Lee Settle, Amelia Earhart, Sheila M. Schwartz, Manuel Gonzales, Jonathan Tel, Rachel Cantor, Bernard Chabbert, John Bowe, Gary Horn, Brad Kessler, and Linda Yablonsky.



Living Room

A Novel by Rachel Sherman

"Often praised for her lack of sentimentality, Sherman doesn't hesitate to capture her characters' weird, unbecoming thoughts . . . her writing lends itself to the form: her story structures tight as fists, her prose terse and unadorned."

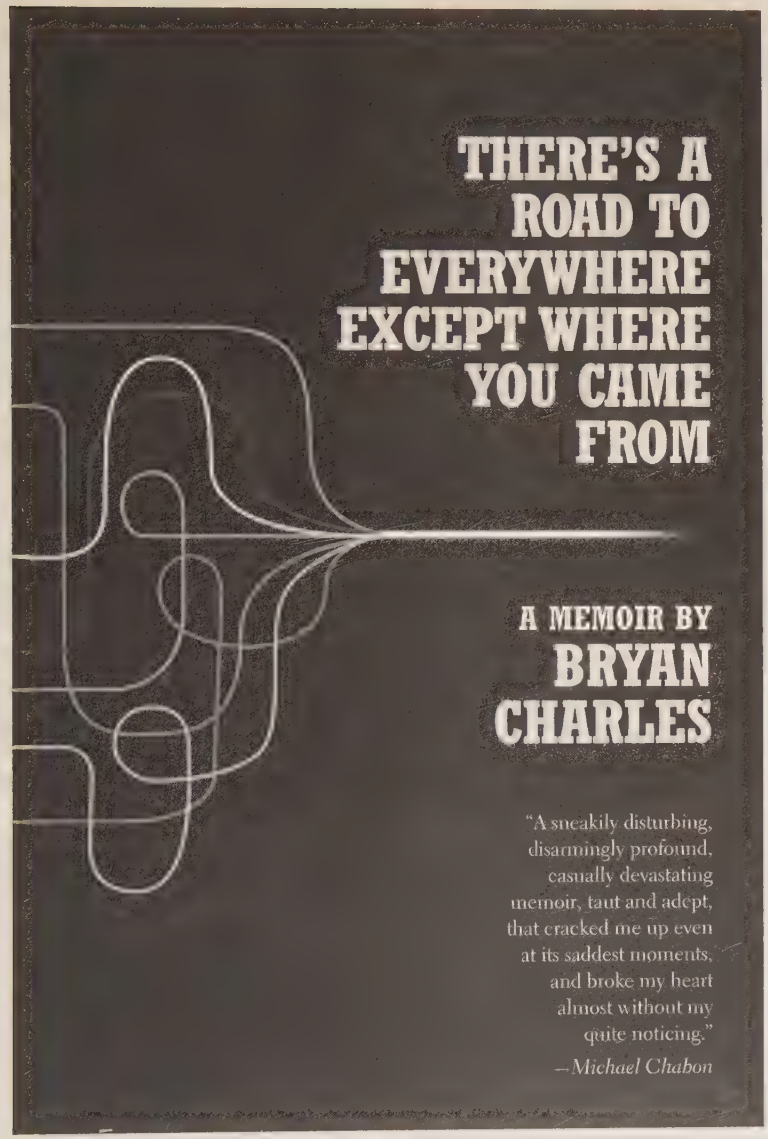
—The Rumpus

"From the same stock as writers like Lorrie Moore and Amy Hempel, Sherman's characters thrive under her incredibly particular, telescopic descriptions of the fucked-up human condition. Strange little moments sparkle with humor . . . and others are so humane, they break your heart."

—The Faster Times

LIVING ROOM
A NOVEL BY
RACHEL SHERMAN
"Here we have the fractured lives of three generations of women told with zero sentimentality and a huge amount of heart. Living Room is edgy, moving, smart, funny and altogether human. Rachel Sherman is the real deal."
—Dani Shapiro

NEW FROM OPEN CITY BOOKS


THERE'S A ROAD TO EVERYWHERE EXCEPT WHERE YOU CAME FROM
A MEMOIR BY
BRYAN CHARLES
"A sneakily disturbing, disarmingly profound, casually devastating memoir, taut and adept, that cracked me up even at its saddest moments, and broke my heart almost without my quite noticing."
—Michael Chabon

"This is the book I can't forget . . . Full of insightful, transcendent regular-guy moments and bad decisions, it didn't make me like the author, but it knocked me on my ass."

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

"Honest and unembellished, this is a forthright portrait of the exact spot where the life of one writer in New York intersects with history. A fresh vision of how the familiar becomes the inevitable."

—Joan Silber
author of *Ideas of Heaven* and *The Size of the World*

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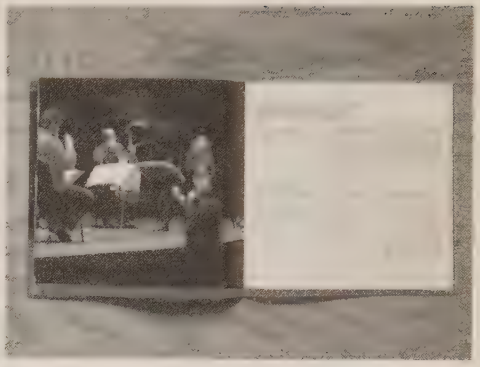

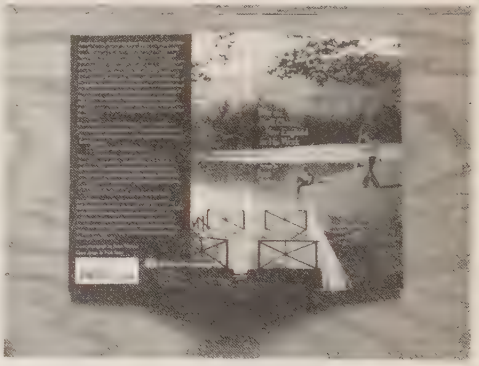

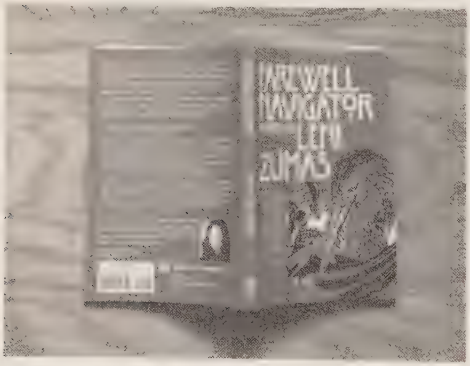

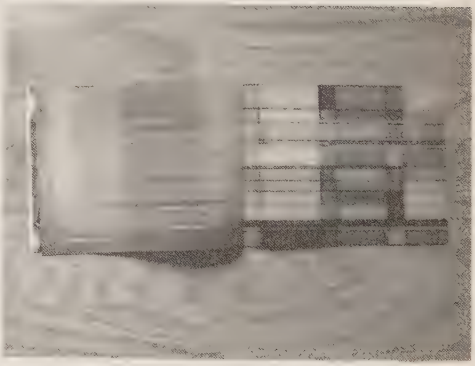

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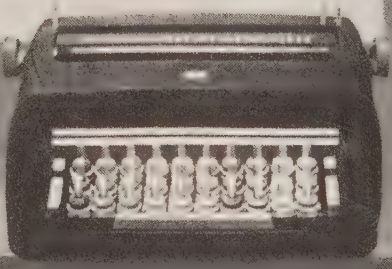

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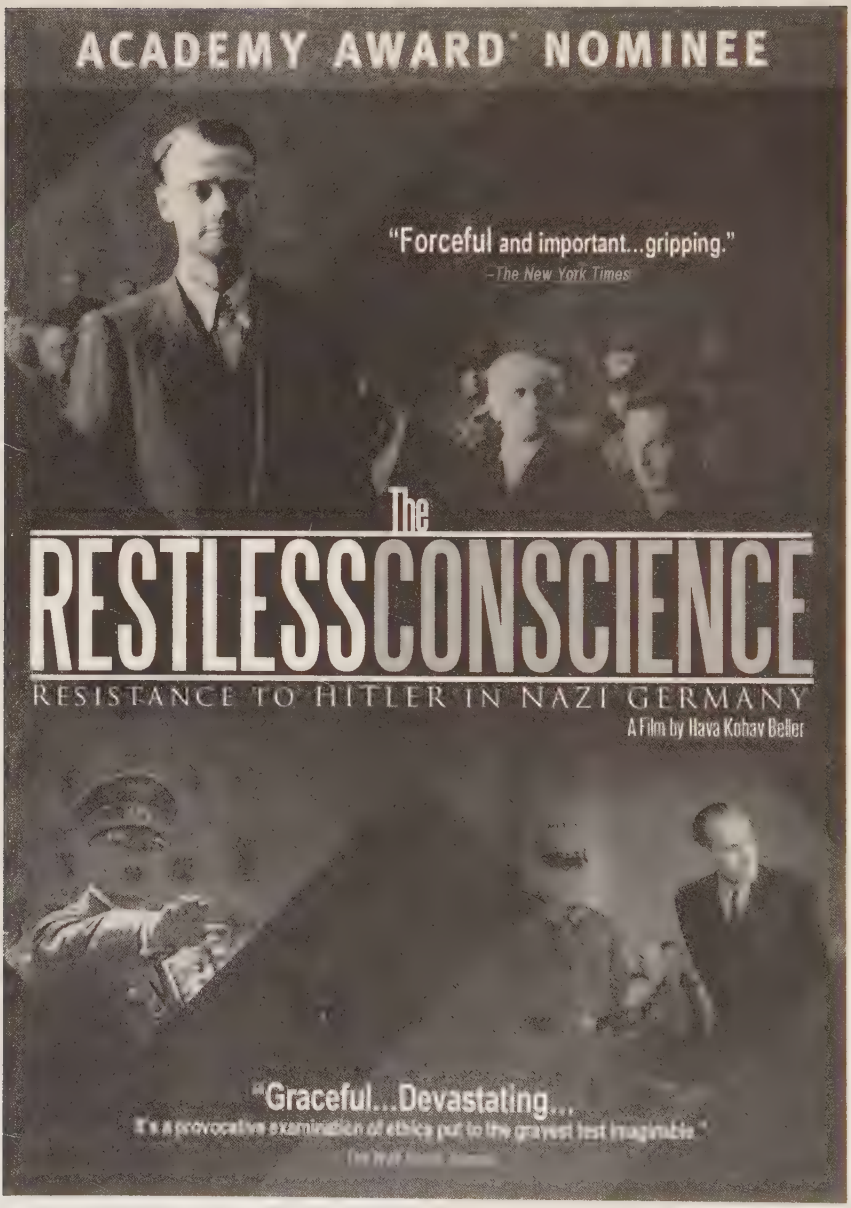
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—**Harry Haun,** ***The Daily News***

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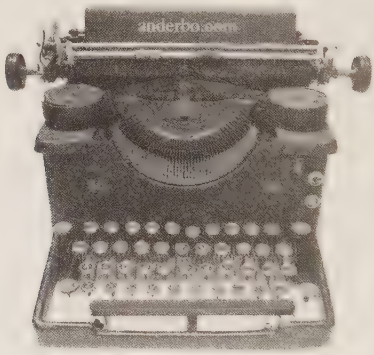

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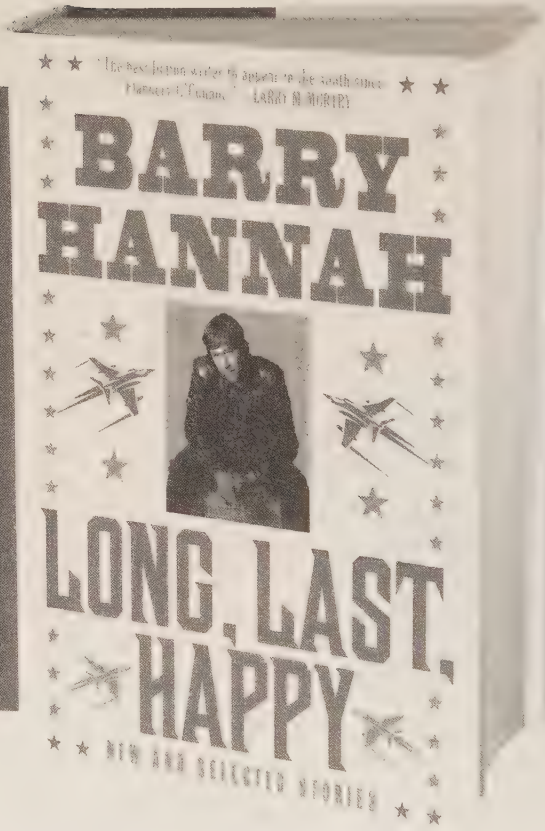

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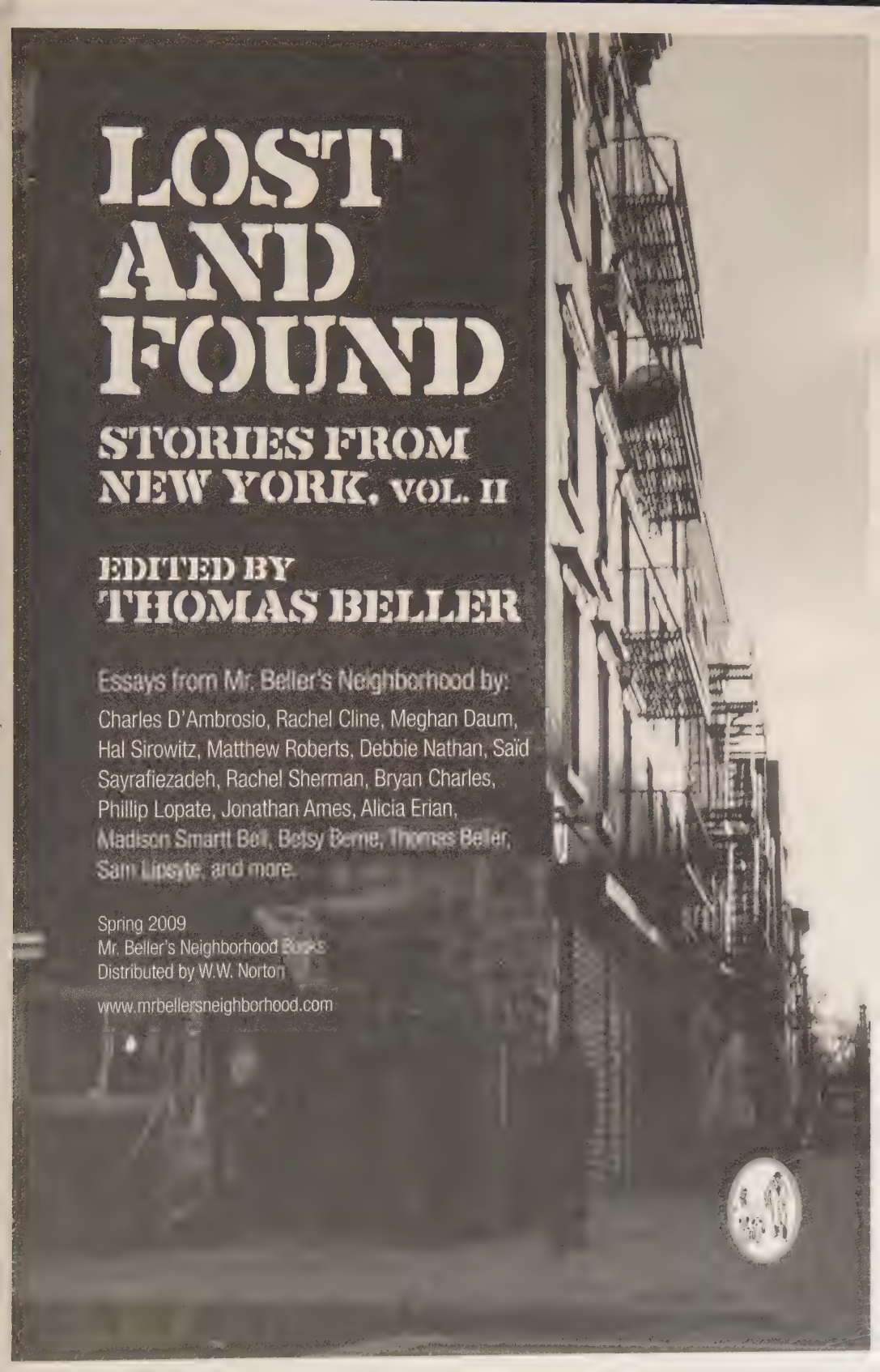
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CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

HENRY ALCALAY lives in New York. His story "Learn to Drive Trucks Big Money" appeared in *Open City #26*.

JOHN BREINER is originally from New York, and has lived and worked in Brooklyn since 1999. He has a number of New York shows planned for spring 2011, but is currently on a self-imposed residency on the edge of a cold, large lake about an hour north of Toronto. (johnbreiner.blogspot.com)

CHRISTOPHER CHENEY's poems have most recently appeared in *Bateau, Supermachine*, *Notnostrums*, and *Forklift, Ohio*. His digital chapbook can be found by Googling "They Kissed Their Homes." He teaches high school students in Jamaica, Queens.

CATHERINE DESPONT was born and lives in New York, and is currently working on her first novel. She has an MFA in fiction from Columbia University.

MONICA FAMBROUGH is from Mableton, Georgia, and currently lives in Chicago. She is the author of two chapbooks: *Black Beauty* (Katalanché Press) and *Meta Parka* (self-published). Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *A Public Space, jubilat, GlitterPony* and *Fairy Tale Review.*

AMY GARTRELL lives and works in Brooklyn. Her most recent exhibition, "Whatever and Ever," was at the Daniel Reich Gallery, New York City.

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA's thirteen books of poems include *Warhorses*, *Taboo*, and *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems*, for which he received the Pulitzer Prize. The poems in this issue are part of his new collection, *The Chameleon Couch*, forthcoming from Farrar, Straus and Giroux in April. He teaches at Princeton University.

LOUIS B. JONES has been publishing lately in magazines. His new novel, *Radiance*, will be published in the spring by Counterpoint Press.

GIUSEPPE O. LONGO holds degrees in mathematics and electronic engineering and is professor of Information Theory at the University of Trieste, Italy. He has published three novels, eight collections of short stories, and a collection of plays. His work has received a variety of awards and prizes and has been translated from Italian into several languages.

KARAN MAHAJAN was born in 1984 and grew up in New Delhi. His first novel, *Family Planning*, is being published in nine countries and was recently short-listed for the Dylan Thomas Prize. His writing has appeared in *The Believer*, *Bookforum,* and on NPR's *All Things Considered*.

JAMES B. MICHELS is a native of Michigan. He has a PhD in literature and has published critical articles on James Joyce, Roland Barthes, and Yves Bonnefoy. He teaches Italian language and culture at Wayne State University in Detroit.

SIGRID NUNEZ's sixth novel, *Salvation City*, was published in September 2010. *Sempre Susan,* her memoir about Susan Sontag, will be published in April 2011.

JOHN O'CONNOR is from Kalamazoo, Michigan. His writing has appeared in *Quarterly West, The Believer, Gastronomica*, and *The Best Creative Nonfiction 2006*. His essay "The Boil" appeared in *Open City* #25. He lives in New York.

ANN PACKER is the author of two national best sellers, *Songs Without Words* and *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*, which won a Great Lakes Book Award and the Kate Chopin Literary Award. Her short fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker, Zoetrope: All Story,* and *Ploughshares*. *Swim Back to Me*, a new collection of stories plus a novella, is due from Knopf in April 2011.

ED PARK is the author of the novel *Personal Days,* and is a founding editor of *The Believer*.

ANDREW PRYOR teaches creative writing and English literature at Lindenwood University in Saint Charles, Missouri. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Indiana Review*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Witness*, and elsewhere.

EVAN REHILL's work has been published in *American Short Fiction, 14 Hills, Big Bell, Instant City, Ping Pong*, and *Watchword Press*. He earned his MFA in creative writing from San Francisco State University and currently teaches at Pratt Institute, Rutgers University, and the Gotham Writers' Workshop. He lives in Brooklyn, where he is at work on a novel.

C.I. SHELTON is a graduate of Wabash College. He now teaches English in Joplin, Missouri. This is his first published story.

JENNIFER STYPERK's poetry has been published in *The Texas Observer* and *Language and Culture* and is forthcoming in the *Denver Quarterly* among other literary magazines. A recipient of a James A. Michener Grant for Writers and the Thomas Dobbs Jr. Scholarship for Journalism, she lives in Los Angeles.

ALISSA QUART completed her first poetry manuscript, *Protocol,* during a 2010 Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University. Mostly a journalist, she is finishing her third nonfiction book on American outsiders. Her other works of journalism are the books *Branded* and *Hothouse Kids*. She writes for a variety of publications, including *Columbia Journalism Review*, *The New York Times Magazine,* and *The Atlantic*.

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OPEN

ISSUE # 1

"The Crazy Person" by Mary Gaitskill, "La Vie en Rose" by Hubert Selby Jr., "Cathedral Parkway" by Vince Passaro. Art by Jeff Koons and Devon Dikeou. Cover by Ken Schles, whose *Invisible City* sells for thousands on eBay. Stan Friedman's poems about baldness and astronomy, Robert Polito on Lester Bangs, Jon Tower's real life letters to astronauts. (Sold out! Electronic edition coming soon.)

ISSUE # 2

A first glimpse of Martha McPhee; a late burst from Terry Southern. Jaime Manrique's "Twilight at the Equator." Art by Paul Ramirez-Jonas, Kate Milford, Richard Serra. Kip Kotzen's "Skate Dogs," Richard Foreman's "Poetry City" with playful illustrations by Daniel Pinchbeck, David Shields' "Sports" and his own brutal youth. (Ken Schles found the negative of our cover girl on Thirteenth Street and Avenue B. We're still looking for the girl. $25)

ISSUE # 3

Irvine Welsh's "Eurotrash" (his American debut), Richard Yates (from his last, unfinished novel), Patrick McCabe (years before *The Butcher Boy*). Art by Francesca Woodman (with an essay by Betsy Berne), Jacqueline Humphries, Allen Ginsberg, Alix Lambert. A short shot of Lipsyte—"Shed"—not available anywhere else. Plus Alfred Chester's letters to Paul Bowles. Chip Kidd riffs on the Fab Four. (Very few copies left! $100)

ISSUE # 4

Stories by the always cheerful Cyril Connolly ("Happy Deathbeds"), Thomas McGuane, Jim Thompson, Samantha Gillison, Michael Brownstein, and Emily Carter, whose "Glory Goes and Gets Some" was reprinted in *Best American Short Stories.* Art by Julianne Swartz and Peter Nadin. Poems by David Berman and Nick Tosches. Plus Denis Johnson in Somalia. (A monster issue, sales undercut by slightly rash choice of cover art by editors. Get it while you can! $15)

ISSUE # 5

Change or Die

Stories by David Foster Wallace, Siobhan Reagan, Irvine Welsh. Jerome Badanes' brilliant novella, "Change or Die" (film rights still available). Poems by David Berman and Vito Acconci. Plus Helen Thorpe on the murder of Ireland's most famous female journalist, and Delmore Schwartz on T. S. Eliot's squint. (Still sold-out! See our recently revamped Web site for excerpts.)

CITY back issues

Make an investment in your future...
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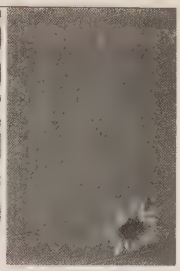
The Only Woman He's Ever Left
Stories by James Purdy, Jocko Weyland, Strawberry Saroyan. Michael Cunningham's "The Slap of Love." Poems by Rick Moody, Deborah Garrison, Monica Lewinsky, Charlie Smith. Art by Matthew Ritchie, Ellen Harvey, Cindy Stefans. Rem Koolhaas project. With a beautiful cover by Adam Fuss. (Only $10 for this blockbuster.)



The Rubbed Away Girl
Stories by Mary Gaitskill, Bliss Broyard, and Sam Lipsyte. Art by Jimmy Raskin, Laura Larson, and Jeff Burton. Poems by David Berman, Elizabeth Macklin, Stephen Malkmus, and Will Oldham. (We found some copies in the back of the closet so were able to lower the price! $25 (it *was* $50))

Beautiful to Strangers
Stories by Caitlin O'Connor Creevy, Joyce Johnson, and Amine Wefali, back when her byline was Zaitzeff (now the name of her organic sandwich store at Nassau & John Streets—go there for lunch!). Poems by Harvey Shapiro, Jeffrey Skinner, and Daniil Kharms. Art by David Robbins, Liam Gillick, and Elliott Puckette. Piotr Uklanski's cover is a panoramic view of Queens, shot from the top of the World Trade Center in 1998. ($10)

Bewitched
Stories by Jonathan Ames, Said Shirazi, and Sam Lipsyte. Essays by Geoff Dyer and Alexander Chancellor, who hates rabbit. Poems by Chan Marshall, Lucy Anderson, and Edvard Munch on intimate and sensitive subjects. Art by Karen Kilimnick, Giuseppe Penone, Mark Leckey, Maurizio Cattelan, and M.I.M.E. (Our bestselling issue. ($10))

Editors' Issue
Previously demure editors publish themselves. Enormous changes at the last minute. Stories by Robert Bingham, Thomas Beller, Daniel Pinchbeck, Joanna Yas, Adrian Dannatt, Kip Kotzen, Geoffrey O' Brien, Lee Smith, Amanda Gersh, and Jocko Weyland. Poems by Tony Torn. Art by Nick Stone, Meghan Gerety, and Alix Lambert. (Years later, Ken Schles's cover photo appears on a Richard Price novel.) ($10)

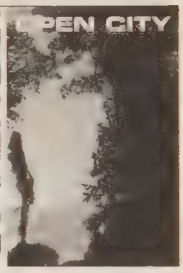
OPEN

Octo Ate Them All

Vestal McIntyre emerges from the slush pile like aphrodite with a brilliant story that corresponds to the tattoo that covers his entire back. Siobhan Reagan thinks about strangulation. Fiction by Melissa Pritchard and Bill Broun. Anthropologist Michael Taussig's Cocaine Museum. Gregor von Rezzori's meditation on solitude, sex, and raw meat. Art by Joanna Kirk, Sebastien de Ganay, and Ena Swansea. ($10)

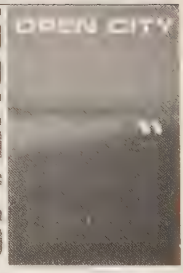
Equivocal Landscape

Sam Brumbaugh, author of *Goodbye, Goodness*, debuts with a story set in Kenya, Daphne Beal and Swamiji, Paula Bomer sees red on a plane, Heather Larimer hits a dog, and Hunter Kennedy on the sexual possibilities of Charlottesville versus West Texas. Ford Madox Ford on the end of fun. Poetry by Jill Bialosky and Rachel Wetzsteon. Art by Miranda Lichtenstein and Pieter Schoolwerth; a love scene by Toru Hayashi. Mungo Thomson passes notes. ($10)



Hi-fi

Sam Lipsyte introduces Steve. Nick Tosches smokes with God. Jack Walls remembers the gangs of Chicago. Vince Passaro ponders adult content. Poetry by Honor Moore, Sarah Gorham, and Melissa Holbrook Pierson. Mini-screenplay by Terry Southern. Art by Luisa Kazanas, Peter Pinchbeck, and Julianne Swartz. Special playwrighting section guest edited by Tony Torn. ($10)

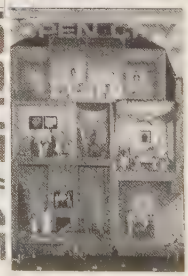


Something Like Ten Million

The defacto life and death issue. Amazing debut stories from Nico Baumbach, Michiko Okubo, and Sarah Porter; Craig Chester writes on why he has the face he deserves; a bushy, funny, and phallic art project from Louise Belcourt. Special poetry section guest edited by Lee Ann Brown. A photo essay of fleeing Manhattanites by Ken Schles. The cover is beautiful and weird, a bright hole in downtown Manhattan. ($10)

That Russian Question

Another excerpt from Amine Wefali's *Westchester Burning (see Open City #8)*. Alicia Erian in *Jeopardy*. Jocko Weyland does handplants for an audience of elk. James Lasdun on travel and infidelity. Lara Vapnyar's debut publication. Poetry by Steve Healy, Daniel Nester, Lev Rubinshtein, and Daniel Greene. ($10)



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I wait, I wait.

A brilliant outtake from Robert Bingham's *Lightning on the Sun*. Ryan Kenealy on the girl who ran off with the circus; Nick Tosches on Proust. Art by Allen Ruppersberg, David Bunn, Nina Katchadourian, Matthew Higgs, and Matthew Brannon. Stories by Evan Harris, Lewis Robinson, Michael Sledge, and Bruce Jay Friedman. Rick Rofihe feels Marlene. Poetry by Dana Goodyear, Nathaniel Bellows, and Kevin Young. ($10)

They're at it again.

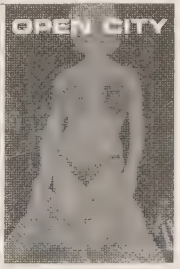
Lara Vapnyar's "There Are Jews in My House," Chuck Kinder on Dagmar. Special poetry section guest edited by Honor Moore, including C. K. Williams, Victoria Redel, Eamon Grennan, and Carolyn Forché. Art by Stu Mead, Christoph Heemann, Jason Fox, Herzog film star Bruno S., and Sophie Toulouse, whose "Sexy Clowns" project has become a "character note for [our] intentions" (says the *Literary Magazine Review*). See what all the fuss is about. ($10)

I Want to Be Your Shoebox

Susan Chamandy on Hannibal's elephants and hockey, Mike Newirth's noirish "Semiprecious." Rachel Blake's "Elephants" (an unintentional elephant theme emerges). Poetry by Catherine Bowman and Rodney Jack. Art by Viggo Mortensen, Alix Lambert, Marcellus Hall, Mark Solotroff, and Alaskan Pipeline polar bear cover by Jason Middlebrook (we're still trying to figure out what the bear had for lunch). ($10)

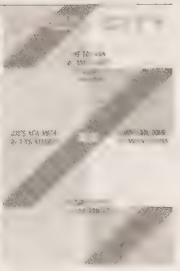
Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc

Stories by Jason Brown, Bryan Charles, Amber Dermont, Luis Jaramillo, Dawn Raffel, Bryan Charles, Nina Shope, and Alicia Erian. Robert Olen Butler's severed heads. Poetry by Jim Harrison, Sarah Gorham, Trevor Dannatt, Matthew Rohrer & Joshua Beckman, and Harvey Shapiro. Art by Bill Adams, Juliana Ellman, Sally Ross, and George Rush. Eerie, illustrated children's story by Rick Rofihe and Thomas Roberston. Saucy cover by Wayne Gonzales. ($10)



Homecoming

"The Egg Man" a novella by Scott Smith, author of *A Simple Plan* (screenplay and book); Ryan Kenealy does God's math; an unpublished essay by Paul Bowles. Stories by Rachel Sherman, Sam Shaw, and Maxine Swann. Art by Shelter Serra and William McCurtin (of *Story of My Scab* and *Elk* fame). Poems by Anthony Roberts, Honor Moore, and David Lehman. ($10)



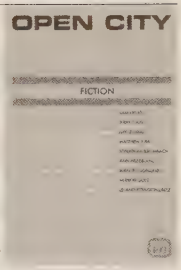
OPEN

Ballast
Matthew Zapruder's "The Pajamaist," David Nutt's "Melancholera," fiction by Rachel Sherman, a Nick Tosches poem, Phillip Lopate's "Tea at the Plaza," David A. Fitschen on life on tour as a roadie. Poetry by Matt Miller and Alex Phillips. Art by Molly Smith, Robert Selwyn, Miranda Lichtenstein, Lorenzo Petrantoni, Billy Malone, and M Blash. ($10)

ISSUE # 21

Fiction/Nonfiction
A special double-sided issue featuring fiction by Sam Lipsyte, Jerry Stahl, Herbert Gold, Leni Zumas, Matthew Kirby, Jonathan Baumbach, Ann Hillesland, Manuel Gonzales, and Leland Pitts-Gonzales. Nonfiction by Priscilla Becker, Vestal McIntyre, Eric Pape, Jocko Weyland, and Vince Passaro. ($10)

ISSUE # 22



Prose by Poets
Prose and poetry by Anne Sexton, Nick Flynn, Jim Harrison, Wayne Koestenbaum, Joe Wenderoth, Glyn Maxwell, Rebecca Wolff, Vijay Seshadri, Jerome Badanes, Deborah Garrison, Jill Bialosky, Cynthia Kraman, Max Blagg, Thorpe Moeckel, Greg Purcell, Rodney Jack, Hadara Bar-Nadav, and Nancy Willard. ($10)

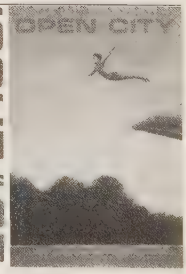
ISSUE # 23

Secret Engines
Three debuts: Malerie Willens, Gerard Coletta, and Ian Martin. Stanley Moss as a bronze satyr; heavy breathing with Jeff Johnson. Stories by Jonathan Baumbach, Erin Brown, Wayne Conti, James Hannaham, and Claire Keegan. Poetry by Mark Hartenbach, Alex Lemon, and Baron Wormser. Art by Amy Bird, Jay Batlle, Noelle Tan, and Doug Shaeffer. ($10)

ISSUE # 24

High Wire
Robert Stone's epic novella (set midway between the reigns of Elvis Presley and Bill Clinton); stories by Jonathan Ames, Charles Bukowski, Rivka Galchen, Jon Groebner, Said Shirazi, Giuseppe O. Longo, and Sarah Gardner Borden. Poetry by Howard Altmann, Jennifer Richter, and Ben Carlton Turner. Art by Ellen Harvey, Michael Scoggins, Mark C, and Duncan Hannah. ($10)

ISSUE # 25



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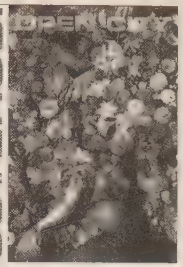
The New Soft Shoe
Brad Gooch on Flannery O'Connor at Iowa; stories by Kirsty Gunn, Mohammed Naseehu Ali, Matthew Specktor, Caedra Scott-Flaherty, Henry Alcalay, and Chris Spain. Poetry by Priscilla Becker, William Benton, John Fandel, Christopher Kang, Strawberry Saroyan, and Elizabeth Schmidt. Gorgeous collage cover by Balint Zsako. ($10)



Birthmark
Patricia Bosworth on Lois Gould, Edmund White on Harold Brodkey. Stories by A. M. Homes, Vestal McIntyre, and Zachary Lazar; nonfiction by Bryan Charles; a posthumous fiction debut by Eva Marer. Poetry by Billy Collins, Dara Weir, and CJ Evans. Stunning cover and art project by Karen Green; art projects by Eliott Puckette, Louise Despont, Audrey Salmon, and Christopher de Lotbinière. ($10)

Fortified Area
Three exciting short-story debuts by Sarah Malone, Michael McGrath, and Leslie Maslow. Fiction by Sam Lipsyte, Christopher Sorrentino, Jonathan Dee, and Gary Lippman. Poetry by James Schuyler, Sophie Cabot Black, Dan Sofaer, Ben Nachumi, Kevin Oberlin, and Adam Peterson. Nonfiction by Laurie Stone and Louis B. Jones. Cover by Miranda Lichtenstein. ($10)

Equilibrium
Walter Kirn in California (with beautifully concidental echoes of the Robert Stone piece in issue 25); early glimpses of Jason Brown's and Bryan Charles's memoirs, the latter in stores now; stories by Leopoldine Core (debut), Abigail Thomas, Antonya Nelson, Robert Walser, Kate Christensen, and Michael Carroll. Art project by *Weather Underground* director Sam Green. ($10)

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Curiosity

Sigird Nunez

BACK WHEN I WAS BETWEEN COLLEGE AND LAW SCHOOL I LIVED in a tenement building on the Lower East Side. My grandmother had died and left me some money—not a fortune, by any means, but enough for me to pursue my dream of living in New York for a year or two or even longer if I was careful.

I found a part-time job right away: weekend nights, I waited on tables at Phebe's on the Bowery. Coincidence: my name is Phoebe, and I immediately dropped the *o* since obviously that spelling was cooler. (In law school, I changed it back.) I tried to live as cheaply as possible, resisting, for example, the boss-looking vintage motorcycle jacket for sale at Trash & Vaudeville on St. Mark's Place. I bought a lot of other stuff there, though, mostly out of the final-markdown bin: a whole wardrobe for one or two bucks an item.

I didn't know anyone in the city when I got there, but all I had to do to meet people—some of whom are still my friends almost four decades later—was hang out in Washington Square Park. There was also Tompkins Square Park, but I avoided it after a barbaric-looking woman with a tattooed scalp hit me with an empty beer can and a stream of abuse cut off by a belch so fierce I thought I'd see flames shoot from her mouth.

As for my neighbors, I never got to know any of them. It was a run-down, seriously neglected building—a building for poor people

("which is precisely why you have no business there," my parents grumbled). Years of grime had accumulated in the halls, which reeked of what some said was roach killer but others said was the smell of roaches themselves: a smell like peppered roses. There was a sign above the front door: PLEASE KEEP LOCK AND NOT LET IN STRANG PEOPLES. But the intercom system usually didn't work, and tenants left the door unlocked and let in strang peoples all the time—a risky practice, for sure, but one which, at least while I lived there, brought no harm.

I lived on the second floor, in a railroad apartment—kitchen, living room, bedroom—with windows facing the street, and no bathroom. The toilet was in a closet behind a curtain, and there was a small tub in the kitchen. (You could only bathe sitting up.) I slept in a loft, which in winter could make me feel like Heidi but in summer was like lying inside a coffin. In the living-room floor was a hole large enough that, if I put my eye to it, I could spy on the Ukrainian family below. I didn't have to put my ear to it to hear them fighting, which they did most days. They also did so much cooking that it was like living above a restaurant. Every hour of the day, it seemed, something was cooking down there; I could have survived on just the fumes. These were not the only immigrants in the building. In fact, the tenants were mostly immigrants, including other Ukrainians and a young Polish couple next door, who were expecting a baby and who fought a lot, too, but savagely, like archenemies. Across the hall lived a pale, skulking young man who always acted nervous, his intense dark eyes rolling in a kind of anguish when you looked him in the face, as if he was guilty of some crime. The whole place made me think of Dostoyevsky, whose work I had skimmed in college.

Also across the hall was a woman who looked to be about my age, and who I thought at first might become a friend. She was very pretty, though she wore too much makeup and too much audible jewelry—you'd think it was the Tambourine Man coming up behind you—and she didn't seem to own a single outfit that didn't make her look like she'd been hosed down. She had, I noted with envy, lots of dates, but she was not friendly. Whenever I said hello to her, she

would just barely smile and then immediately drop her gaze as people do when they don't want you to speak to them.

I knew her name because it was on her mailbox (though this was the kind of building where many tenants don't put their names on their buzzers or mailboxes): Viktoriya Tiborovsky. From what I could tell, she had no fixed schedule, which made me think either she was some kind of student or she worked irregular hours—though I also suspected that, like some other able-bodied people in that building, she might be collecting unemployment or scamming welfare. She had a cat, which sometimes darted into the hall when the door was open. A skinny young cat of a startling, refined beauty, with a pointed little muzzle and magnificent eyes: Audrey Hepburn transformed by a spell.

One night just after I had started my shift, she walked into Phebe's and sat down at a table in my station. When I approached she looked at me as if she could not quite place me. "We live on the same floor," I said. "My name's Phebe." With a hesitation that struck me as rude, and without any expression, she said, "I am Inna," before turning her full attention to the menu I'd handed her. She had an accent, as expected, but the name was a total surprise. But whatever the story—and it could have been as simple as that she was subletting from someone named Viktoriya Tiborovksy—I was no longer interested in her. Reserved people have never been my type.

I liked her even less when I saw what a small tip she had left me.

My curiosity revived, though, when I figured out (and this did not take long) that the men I observed on their way to and from her apartment were not really dates. It astonished me that she could be so bold. I wouldn't have expected her to worry about the super since no such person appeared to exist, and, from all evidence, the landlord would not have cared how a tenant came up with the money so long as he or she paid the rent. But what if one of the neighbors reported her to the police? (For that reason alone you'd have thought she'd be nicer to me.) I found it hard to believe I was the only one in the building who knew what she was up to. Not that there was a stream of men coming and going all day long; it was more of a trickle. But it was a constant trickle, and it was easy to spot them after a while, these

mostly middle-aged men, almost always dressed in business suits, who, when they passed you on the stairs, acrobatically avoided eye contact. None of them looked to be from the neighborhood, but once I recognized a man I'd seen on posters advertising a series of lectures on architecture at Cooper Union, and the imp in me would not be suppressed. "Have fun, professor," I called over my shoulder, though I dared not turn to see his response.

A few years earlier I might have been scandalized. But in college I'd known women who worked in topless bars or strip clubs, and at least one who acted in porn films. I always thought the claim that large numbers of women in other professions—nurses, schoolteachers, even policewomen—moonlighted as prostitutes was an exaggeration. But it was a sign of the times that you heard this claim often, along with the opinion that the selling of sex, like the selling of marijuana, should be legal. I'd also recently seen the movie *Klute*, in which Jane Fonda played a new breed of hooker: educated and stylish, articulating for her high-class analyst how she thrives on the feeling of control she gets from tricking. (And of course tricking doesn't stop her from winning the detective-hero, either.)

Those were the days when my model for how not to behave was my parents, who had alienated me as far back as high school by being proud Goldwater Republicans, and who would have had the police on Inna's case in a heartbeat. On the other hand, the friends with whom I shared my discovery about my neighbor took it in stride. Who were we to judge her, man? It was her body, and it wasn't like she was hurting anyone. But I did wonder about her, this ordinary-seeming young woman with her pretty, high-cheekboned face and Alice-in-Wonderland hair, who I was certain was not an addict like, say, the streetwalkers in Times Square, those ghastly, battered-looking wrecks who could never be mistaken for anything but the smack whores they were. Who knew how or why Inna had gotten into the Life? Maybe she was trying to earn money to put herself through clerical school or open her own nail salon. Maybe this was the only way she could pay off some crushing debt she'd been unfortunate enough to incur. Or maybe she was sacrificing herself to help someone else, a loved one who needed a life-saving operation.

Speaking of money, I couldn't help being curious about how much she charged—and did she have a pimp? Could one of those men who visited her be her pimp? If so, she never had any trouble with him that I could tell. I never heard any violence—I never heard any noise at all—coming from her apartment. (Or maybe instead of a pimp she had a madam; maybe that's who Viktoriya was.) I wondered also what her apartment was like, whether it was decorated in some special style. What sprang to mind was silly and improbable but remarkably persistent: red-plush furniture, Oriental rugs, a brass bed, satin sheets, ginger-jar lamps with fringed crimson shades. . . .

I wondered about the cat. What if a customer was allergic to cats, or hated or was spooked by them, as many people are?

But all this makes it sound as if I gave far more thought to the situation than I really did. In fact, I saw it as just one more adjustment to be made in a crazy city that demanded many such adjustments. It was part of the darkness of that neighborhood, the seamy strangeness of that building. Downstairs, the madly cooking and squabbling Ukrainians; next door, the Polish couple who, now that their child had been born, went at each other worse than ever; across the hall, Raskolnikov, and, next door to him, Inna the hooker. Though I'd never lived with people like this before, it didn't take long for me to get used to them all enough to be able to ignore them.

I continued to say hello to Inna when we met, and though I never got the sense she would welcome conversation, at times her smile struck me as a bit brighter or more relaxed, as if she might be warming up to me. But I didn't see her in Phebe's again, and, as I say, except for when I ran into her I didn't think much about her. I was busy with my own life and my growing number of new friends, which now included a special one: an NYU philosophy grad student named Josh.

Early one morning, right after I got up, I heard an urgent tapping at my door and a small voice calling "FEE-be, FEE-be," just like the bird. I could tell that it was Inna, and that she was crying, and when I opened the door I could tell from her red and swollen face that she had been crying a good long time—maybe all night. She was breathing asthmatically through her mouth, and I saw for the first time that

one of her front teeth was chipped and discolored, like old tile. She looked so distraught, my throat tightened in alarm and pity for her.

It was her mother. "She is in hospital. She is having infarct."

Her mother lived in Chicago, and Inna could not wait to go to her. She had managed to get on a flight departing in a few hours. She didn't know what to expect when she reached her mother's bedside, but would I look after the cat while she was gone? I said yes, of course.

Just before taking a cab to the airport, she dropped off a set of keys and told me she had left enough food to last the cat at least until the following night. But I let myself in moments after she'd gone.

Her apartment was like mine: the same three little rooms, the tub in the kitchen, the toilet in the closet, but her windows looked out on the back of another building. There wouldn't have been much light in any case, but the windows were covered by thick army-green curtains so that the apartment was almost pitch-dark even in daytime. Nothing like the Victorian boudoir of my imagination, it reminded me of a modest motel or dorm room. No frills, just a few pieces of plain furniture and some cheap scatter rugs. There was one small bookcase that held no books but a pile of magazines, American and Russian. A fat Russian-English dictionary sat on top of an antique-looking portable TV set, which interested me because I had no TV of my own. But when I turned it on I got a picture like a pointillist painting. She had a radio but no stereo. The bed was a double mattress on a box spring and took up all the space in that room. There were no pictures or photographs of any kind, no decorative accessories except for some throw pillows and a large number of scented candles that made the air smell like fruit on the cusp of rot. No whips or bonds or costumes or masks, nothing of that sort—not in view, at least. (It remained to be seen whether I'd be able to resist snooping through closets and drawers.) But there was what I took to be one telling sign: on the kitchen counter sat half a dozen bottles of liquor and a couple of glasses of the kind my parents used to drink their nightly Old Fashioneds.

She was very tidy. The cat's litter box was hidden in a corner of the living room, behind a bamboo screen. The cat itself, even more regal

up close, looked out of place in that humble dwelling, as if it were slumming. Inna had told me its name, but it was a foreign name and I hadn't quite caught it: something something *ka*.

After a few minutes, I wanted to leave. It seemed so meager and bleak—like the house of a suicide, I couldn't help thinking. No books. So what did she do when she wasn't—working? Sit here by herself watching that crummy TV? It occurred to me that she might have another place somewhere—her real home—and used this one only for business. But all the evidence was against that. And then another unlikely idea came to me: Inna had run away. She'd given her pimp the slip, she was escaping the Life, she was never coming back to Sin City.

I was almost at the door when someone knocked, and I jumped like a burglar caught red-handed. I had no intention of answering, and when the door opened I was badly startled. Without checking I had assumed that Inna's door, like my own, would have automatically locked behind me.

He was startled, too—enough to blurt the obvious: "You're not Vicki."

At that moment we heard footsteps on the landing above, heading for the stairs. The man stepped over the threshold, stealthily letting the door click shut.

Either, in her hurry and distress, Inna (but he'd called her Vicki, hadn't he) had forgotten to cancel this customer's appointment or she had tried but had been unable to reach him in time or, maybe, under the circumstances, she'd decided just to stand him up.

He was peering past me, as if he expected her to emerge from somewhere in the apartment. He was in his forties, I guessed, with a thick head of black hair evenly seamed with silver. He wore a brown suit and a blue shirt but no tie; his collar was open enough for me to see the top of his undershirt. His throat was hairy. I spied a thin, nearly invisible gold chain. He was heavy, but in a manly, well-proportioned way. He wasn't particularly scary, but I was scared anyway. I was panicky.

Calm down, idiot, I told myself. *All you have to do is explain.* And he was eyeing me now, clearly waiting for an explanation. Meanwhile,

the cat, on tip-toe, was tracing mincing figure-eights around his calves. At last I found my tongue.

He listened, nodding, looking vaguely concerned and sympathetic. He said, "That's sad," and "That's very bad," and went from nodding his head to shaking it slowly. It was sad and bad, he repeated. He was a poet.

"It happens," he murmured reasonably. "Act of God. It's okay." But though he was looking at me, and not unkindly, it was as if he was talking to himself. And I was still scared. Maybe because I knew what he was there for, he seemed to fill up the space with his maleness; there might have been ten men pressing in on me, in all their maleness, and I was afraid to breathe normally, afraid to inhale that reek: the reek of a men's locker room.

I could not wait for him to leave. Instead, he strode through the apartment as if he owned it and threw himself onto the bed.

It was so unexpected, I had to sit down. I sank onto one of the kitchen chairs, and instantly the cat jumped in my lap. The air had changed, becoming charged and palpable like the air in the woods right before a storm. The cat started purring. I felt the vibration and heat of its small sleek body in my lap. It got louder and louder. I had never heard a cat purr that loud before, like a white-noise machine.

"Here, kitty kitty."

The cat and I looked at each other, but we both knew who he meant.

In one bound the cat sailed onto the counter amid the glasses and liquor bottles. There was a light tinkling, a dim but merry sound, like wee bells chiming: a fairy wedding. The cat looked back at me over its shoulder, narrowing its splendid eyes.

A bewitched voice said, "Would you like something to drink?"

Thump, came the response. And then another thump. His shoes hitting the floor.

Thump thump thump thump thump. My heart.

"Come to Daddy," he called. So I went.

The day after Inna returned (her mother's condition turned out to be less serious than at first feared; she was sent home from the hospital

at the end of a week), she came again to my door. As I held out her keys, she snatched them roughly out of my hand. Her eyes were gleaming slits, like the cat's, and her voice was deep as a man's.

"You owe me money."

She must have misread my frozen response. She planted her fists on her hips, stamped her foot without moving it, and hissed, "*Half.*"

From then on she was cold toward me, responding to my greetings with such a sullen moue I stopped offering them. Customers came and went as before, but I never ran into that particular man again—though I might well have if I hadn't moved shortly after. My one-year lease was up and, rather than renew it, I decided to move in with two other women I'd met working at Phebe's and who were looking for someone to share a large apartment they'd found in the West Village. I left the old place without ever resolving the question of my neighbor's real name or the more confounding mystery of why she wasn't afraid of getting busted.

Perhaps misled by *Klute*, or by the free-love spirit of the times, I told my new boyfriend the whole story.

What was it like? he said.

Incredibly sexy, I told him.

He wanted to hear every detail, and then he wanted everything to be just the way it had been with me and the john, and that was incredibly sexy, too. But after that night—because of what he now knew about me? Because of what he knew I now knew about him?—I never saw Josh again.

Men.

For years, even though I no longer lived in New York, and never practiced law there, I worried that, somehow, somewhere, that john was going to reappear—perhaps in the form of one of our firm's major clients—and blow the whistle on me, ruining my career, putting my mother and father in their graves, driving away my friends, destroying my marriage, and turning my own children against me.

If you do something wicked, although you can never undo it, you should at least try to make up for it by doing something good. So I was raised. I remember how shocked I was when I saw the hundred dollar bill he took from his wallet. I could have paid the next month's

rent with it and had enough left over to take myself out to dinner. I remember deciding to give every penny to charity. Instead, with the half I got to keep, I bought the vintage motorcycle jacket I'd been coveting since the first moment I saw it.

The White Dog Syndrome

Yusef Komunyakaa

The fluffy white dog sits on a throne of suitcases
stacked on the woman's luggage cart,

& her long black hair sways over the animal's pale eyes
as she uncaps a bottle of mineral water.

Her husband steps to the side & turns his back to them.
She dabs droplets of water off

the dog's mouth with a yellow tea towel & kisses it again.
I glimpse the whitish, ghostly figures

in the paintings I saw yesterday on the high walls of Siena,
the powdered faces of the rich

in a country of medieval peasants & no mercy in the sunlight.
I think of art & money.

The illuminated manuscripts slump
in their gold & pallor.

At least one hundred wings lift the day's heft, & white knights
astride fiery albino horses

gallop out of the Führer's exhibition. Curator of illusions,
pity the little dog she calls Caesar.

Green

I've known billy club, tear gas, & cattle prod,
but not Black Sheep killing White Sheep.
Or vice versa. I've known water hoses
& the subterranean cry of a Black Maria
rounding a city corner on two angry wheels,
but couldn't smell cedar taking root in the air.

I've known of secret graves guarded
by the night owl in oak & poplar.
I've known police dogs on choke chains.
I've known how "We Shall Overcome"
feels on a half-broken tongue,
but not how deeply sunsets wounded the Peacock Throne.

Because of what I never dreamt
I know Hafez's litany balanced on Tamerlane's saber,
a gholam's song limping up the Elburz Mountains—
no, let's come back first to *now*,
to a surge of voices shouting,
Death to the government of potato!

Back to the iron horses of the Basijis
galloping through days whipped bloody
& beaten back into the brain's cave
louder than a swarm of percussion
clobbered in Enghelab Square,
cries bullied into alleyways & cutoffs.

Though each struck bell goes on
mumbling in the executioner's sleep,
there are always two hands holding
on to earth, & I believe their faith
in tomorrow's million green flags waving
could hold back a mile of tanks & turn

the Revolutionary Guard into stone,
that wherever a clue dares to step
a seed is pressed into damp soil.
A shoot, a tendril, the tip of a wing.
One breath at a time, it holds till it is
uprooted, or torn from its own grip.

The Window Dresser's Song

We tango till light slants obscenely
down to naked souls. Step for step,
note for note, they follow me up
from the basement & across the floor,
& then I glide each into a big glass box
where everything begs the passing eye.
We waltz every phrase the body dares
to translate, stolen from a milonga
on a corner back in Buenos Aires,
saying, Now your trousseau's silk . . .
They come from the outer boroughs
with endangered songs in their heads.
My great flair for hues & stripes
wows them on this city sidewalk,
poses my mannequins perfect
behind Plexiglas. We slow dance
till our window is a split personality
of translucency, a ripple of chiffon,
& the lightest cotton from India.
We say how to move, how to be.
Lord, the curves I lean into are
reckless as any other revelation.
If colors & styles clash, a hip
or head swivel, the lift of a hand
or tilt of a lamp can fix twilight.

Bring on the Dancing Horses

Ed Park

WHEN I CALL MY PARENTS, MY MOM TELLS ME MY DAD IS BUSY teaching a class on the Internet. That is, the class is in a classroom but the topic is the Internet. More specifically, he's teaching seniors—that is, old people—how to blog, write anonymous comments on news articles without panicking, poke their children on Facebook, and get away with not writing h, t, t, p, colon, backslash, backslash, w, w, w, dot before every web address.

I had no idea my dad liked the Internet so much. "Who said anything about like?" my mom says. I can hear her clicking away at her keyboard in the background.

My dad is retired—or was. Is it that they need the money? I fantasize about a heretofore unknown gambling problem, hush funds, love children. My mom sells my old comic books and De La Soul cassingles on eBay. She doesn't know I know. Every so often I'll think about stuff I loved in my youth, and a search inevitably brings up her dealer name. I amp the bidding when it seems safe. You could say I'm looking out for her. But how is it that her four grown kids have neglected their parents' financial needs?

I go to bed with a nagging sense of guilt, though this is how I usually go to bed.

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My girlfriend, Tabby, reviews science fiction for a living, which just goes to show you that America is still the greatest, most useless country in the world.

She went to Penumbra College in Vermont and is ABD in comparative literature at Rue University. She's been ABD ever since we met, back when I didn't know what it stood for. Her dissertation is about one or possibly all of these things: manservant literature, robot literature, and the literature of deception.

Tabby is considerably older than me, and by considerably I mean over ten years. I told my parents five, but I don't think they were fooled. Tabby not only remembers life before the Internet, but life before the affordable and relatively silent electric typewriter.

She reads fast, writes faster. She does monthly columns for the *California Science Fiction Review*, *Planets* magazine, *Satellites* magazine, and the website for the Northwest Airlines Frequent Flyer Book Club, which is getting a soft launch.

I didn't think it was possible for someone to read as fast as Tabby does, and for a long time assumed she must be skimming. But whenever I'd quiz her on a novel that we'd both read, she knew every detail. I'd sit there with the book open and ask things like: "Who answers the door in the middle of chapter seven?"

I tried to keep up with Tabby's reviewing, but it's hard when someone's so prolific. I am not friends with many writers, mostly because that means having to read all their articles, stories, essays, books, and even poetry. They expect you to have read it all. With Tabby, I tried. I really did.

But she's what she calls a stylist. I gave up on her *Planets* magazine column after the third one. I got stuck on the opening line: "All time travel is essentially Oedipal."

Tabby is a brilliant genius in her own way, but sometimes I worry that she is turning into an alien. Lately we don't go out much, and she has taken to wearing what she calls a housecoat about the house. Whenever I'd come across the word "housecoat" in a brittle British novel of misaddressed correspondence and quiet adultery, I would try to picture what was meant. I was never sure, but surely it isn't this

thing that Tabby more or less lives in, a sort of down-filled poncho with stirrups.

At the same time I'm attracted to this girl at work. I don't even want to know how old she is. My guess is that she's younger than me by a margin nearly as great as that separating me from Tabby. But what do I know about age? I thought Tabby was my age when I met her. I'm not a good judge of these things, possibly of anything.

The girl at work. I think English is her second language or possibly her third. She has a lisp and does crazy things with her hair. Her name is Deletia. I think it's the most beautiful name in the world.

Here's a secret. I wrote that down on a Post-It once—*You have the most beautiful name in the world*—and carried it stuck to the inside of a folder. All day I was hideously excited as I sat at my desk, roamed the corridors. Then I forgot about the note for a week. When I saw it again the words filled me with disgust. Before throwing it away, I used the sticky edge to clean out the crevices of my computer.

I have two older brothers, whom I despise, and a younger sister, whom I adore. My brothers have always been exceedingly nice to me, including me in all manner of conversation and sport, yet I can't stand the sight of them. At least individually. When the three of us sons are together, my ill will dissipates somewhat, into a sort of tan-colored cloud of indifference. My sister, Grace, on the other hand, speaks sharply to me and expects me to do things like pick up her dry cleaning and find her cheap tickets to Cancun on the Internet. I mean the real Cancun, not some virtual *playa*. But she's the baby of the family and I'm happy to oblige.

We children all live in the city, and gatherings are complicated for me. If it's me, my eldest brother, and my sister, I get argumentative the second I walk in, under the impression that he is picking on her, being the bully that he undoubtedly is. If it's me, my other brother, and my sister, I'll tell jokes nonstop, poorly thought-out jokes that hinge on antiquated wordplay. I'm trying to defuse the tension caused by the fact that this brother is a withholding control freak.

In fact my brothers are exceedingly nice to my sister as well, and she does not speak sharply to them or expect them to run her errands. Sometimes I think she respects them because they make money and I don't, really. Or because their wives are elegant, capable women, and Tabby is something of an eccentric and a bit of a slob.

Once I was on the crosstown bus and saw Grace and my brothers walking out of a restaurant, laughing. They looked gloriously happy. They posted a picture of their lunch on Facebook. I don't know what they were thinking.

After Internet class, my dad e-mails me. His spelling, in longhand, has always been impeccable, but something about e-mail makes him spell like Prince. Sometimes I have to read his messages aloud, pronouncing the letters and numbers until I figure out the meaning.

He tells me that 2day in class he did a 2torial on how 2 delete spam without opening it. Next week he's going 2 teach them how 2 upload videos 2 Utube. His students R loving the Internet!

I e-mail him back and ask if he wants to chat online. No response, though I know he's still awake. He keeps updating his Facebook posts. Doesn't he know I can see them? Doesn't he know I'm his friend? I stay up till two watching his wording get terse.

Every day, sometimes more than once, science fiction books arrive at the door by mail or messenger. Tabby tears into them. Slabs of space opera line the hall, mortared with alternate history.

There's this one FedEx guy who drops by a couple times a week, bearing such goodies. He's practically family at this point. He buzzes from the lobby three times, impatiently, like he's doing an "O" in Morse code. Tabby hits the door button without asking who it is.

The FedEx guy looks, she once said, like an underwear model with clothes on. Of course Tabby's not attracted to FedEx, as she's easily twice his age. But you can never be sure. They always make a suspicious amount of small talk, so much that it probably qualifies as regular talk. Today she tells me that he's an aspiring writer and wants her advice on where to send stories.

"Are they even science fiction?" I ask.

"They're *speculative* fiction," she says. FedEx has given her some of his work, and apparently it's pretty good, a self-conscious throwback to the age of the pulps, with a tawdry modern veneer. She's thinking of writing a column about him.

"But he hasn't published anything yet," I say.

"Oh he will, and he has," she says, like someone well acquainted with time travel.

I never told my siblings that I saw them from the bus, though I put up a cryptic post on my secret blog. "Sometimes the people you think you can depend on turn out to be *not* so dependable," I wrote. No one knows I have the blog. I've had it for years. It averages three readers a week, who stay on anywhere from zero and four seconds. I keep meaning to delete the thing but the required authentications have changed so much that I can't even figure out how to do it.

Maybe my dad could help me. Lately I've been wondering if he can do my sister's Internet chores for her, like get those plane tickets or update her Facebook status. Grace hasn't logged onto Facebook in a long time. I know this because I keep getting little messages in the corner: Reconnect With Grace. Write on her Wall.

Something tells me Tabby will never finish her dissertation. Part of her wants to finish just to finish. She wants PhD after her name. But realistically, she's never going to teach. There are no jobs in robot literature or manservant literature. I don't know what the literature of deception is.

The latest twist is that Rue University no longer exists in the material sense. It became a low-residency institution two years ago, then an online-only entity, with all teaching, discussion, and advisement done via e-mail. Now it's just a diploma mill. "It's not even worth the paper it's printed on," Tabby says cheerfully. The joke is that they don't even send you a diploma, but rather a PDF that you can download and print if you like.

Tabby gives me a book for my birthday. It's a review copy of something called *The Truculata: A Tale of the Weemim*. I thank her and we

have sex. She keeps on the poncho, stirrups and all. Later I escape to the study with my gift. The prologue begins:

> Ten thousand years have passed since the S'rwrwa conquered the outer colonies of the Confederation, enslaving its peoples by means of superior firepower and the Naxx, a form of mass hypnosis perfected by the rogue wizards known as the Qmzic.

"Oh, good God," I say. I glance at the cover art: a bowtie-shaped spaceship whirling into the void. I notice that *The Truculata* is book two in the third of four projected trilogies. I force myself to read on.

> Only the mysterious Weemim, a clan of psychic Hffr'z descended from the Grand Vizier Fungwafer VIII and his half-horse concubine, continues to offer resistance. But overwhelmed by the S'rwrwavian robot army, and the rise of the vicious Green Lord Exanthatrill, the Weemim are dying out.

I am clawing the side of my head, in agony.

> Their only hope is to bribe the Qmzic with the hallucinogenic seaweed they harvest, and use their powers to unlock the secrets of a small "cube" of impossible geometries called . . . the Truculata.

I'm forever reading about people who get so incensed at a book that they fling it across the room. This always seemed to me journalistic boilerplate, like those ten-minute standing ovations you read about, or audiences booing something at the Cannes Film Festival. Nevertheless, for the first time in my life, I fling a book across the room. The six hundred-page bulk of *The Truculata* leaves a dent in the wall, which I attempt to conceal by moving the lamp.

Later Tabby and her poncho glide into the study. She picks up *The Truculata*, moves the lamp back into position, and begins underlining passages of note.

That evening Deletia sends me text messages that are either extremely suggestive or simply misspelled. I don't think Tabby would ever go through my phone, but anything's possible.

I delete the texts. I delete Deletia. She texts me again an hour later. I don't write back. What could she be thinking?

At work the next day she explains to a bunch of us that someone hacked her phone and e-mail. I can't tell if she's saying that the hacker is an ex-boyfriend or a criminal from her home country, or if these two shadowy figures are one in the same.

My one-liner falls flat, more obscene than I intended. Our secretary looks scandalized, but Deletia smiles. English, I've learned, is her *fourth* language. Later I write her name on a Post-It, over and over again, a downpour of Deletia, and put it in my shirt pocket, right over my heart.

For the past year, and without my knowledge, Tabby has been running a heroic fantasy Web site called Swords of Amber Mist.

"I didn't think you'd be interested," she explains, after I stumble on the bookmark.

She's right: I'm not interested. I am, however, inscrutably, deeply upset. I peek as she updates the site. It's largely fanfic, with characters from different books and movies interbreeding. Aliens, animals, homo sapiens. This is what happens, in post after post. The copulation, as it's often called, takes place in caverns, on ancient battlefields, or in "antechambers." The background is a starlit black, undulating with digital smoke that rises from skull-shaped braziers.

You need to be over eighteen and a member to read or contribute to Swords of Amber Mist. There are banner ads for online role-playing games, medieval-sounding deodorant.

"Does FedEx write for this?" I ask.

"You mean Bob? He's on SoAM all the time," she says. "Oh, he stopped by while you were at the cleaners. There's a package for you in the hall."

On the bench in the hall is one of those silky impermeable FedEx envelopes. The texture's like that of Tabby's futuristic poncho. It's from

my mom, or rather her eBay avatar, and it's addressed to my user name, which she has put in quotation marks. Somehow this kills me.

There's no note inside, no indication that she knows who I am. This is Tabby's address, not mine.

I pull out something sky blue, the cloth as thin as tissue in places. Then I get it: I've unwittingly won the auction for my old Echo and the Bunnymen T-shirt, from that show I didn't even go to. It was sort of after their heyday. I put in the bid two months ago and promptly forgot about it. On the back of the shirt it says: Bring on the Dancing Horses.

Say Please

C. I. Shelton

JEMMIE MCKINLEY RATIONED HERSELF ONE CIGARETTE PER DAY, that she smoked with great delight and often left out on her coffee table to remind herself that something soothing awaited her.

Jemmie McKinley once told her mother to go fuck herself and meant every word of it.

Jemmie McKinley was an anthropology student of the lowest order and spent the majority of her school time dodging lectures, avoiding professors, asking for extensions on papers, or citing some new sort of learning disorder that necessitated more time for test-taking and disallowed pop quizzes. She fudged doctor's evaluations and was prescribed cutting-edge, corrective pills (supply) that she sold to her attention-deficient peers at a moderate markup (demand).

Jemmie McKinley wore vintage T-shirts emblazoned with the faces of conservative pundits in an ironic way. She kept a dog-eared copy of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* in her purse at all times but had yet to read past the preface.

Jemmie McKinley had a small, pursed mouth full of straight, white teeth that hadn't required braces. When people caught sight of them they immediately went about gaping open their mouths, pointing out this incisor or that bicuspid, describing in graphic detail their own orthodontic horror stories, romantic entanglements, profes-

sional befuddlement and subsequent defeats in life.

For this reason, Jemmie McKinley avoided smiling.

She spent most of her spare time and all of her weekends with her boyfriend, Maxwell, in the seclusion of his apartment: drinking pots of coffee, listening to public radio, randomly engaging in protected sex and arguing in great detail about how this whole country was going straight to hell in a handbasket.

They'd been dating for three months, still engaging in the latter stages of feeling one another out, slowly muddling through the awkwardness inherent in new things with new people. Max was gangly and tall, wiry and despite the immense amounts of food that he ate, never seemed to gain weight. He resembled a basketball player from some European country that she didn't know or couldn't pronounce the name of—an Eastern one, whose indigenous people had dark, curly hair, large noses, and often neglected showers.

She liked Max because of the look on his face when a particularly engrossing piece of information flashed across the newswire at the bottom of the television screen. She liked how little he knew about foreign policy and how distressed he became when profiles of endangered species were shown on the nightly news. She liked him because he seemed like even more of an underachiever than she was, yet somehow managed to wear it more graciously. When people asked him what he did for a living he replied that he was "in between things" or "weighing his options" rather than simply saying "unemployed" or, more accurately, "uninterested."

They over-ordered takeout on Friday nights which typically lasted through Saturday evening. On Sundays, they scraped by on untouched cartons of white rice smothered in soy sauce, fortune cookies, and bags of fried wanton strips. There were times when Jemmie would look across the kitchen at Max as he hunkered down to the microwave, entranced as the food on his Styrofoam plate hissed and popped, and decided that she would be more than content if this cycle of things could last forever.

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Max raked the uneaten portion of her food onto his plate. "You must know everything," he said, his mouth still open with surprise.

She raised her hands in a sort of shared disbelief. "I don't know that I'd go that far," Jemmie said. "They just skipped me ahead a few grades."

"Just like that?" he asked.

She snapped her fingers.

"And then what?"

"All I know is that they made me take these silly tests and then somebody, some person, who I suppose was anointed the authority came about and showed us all of these pie graphs and flowcharts and explained that I was 'gifted.'"

"The 'genius czar.' And how old were you?"

"Six. Give or take," she said, peering over her newspaper.

"The only things I cared about when I was six were recess and pizza."

"I think those were the only things that I cared about too. If it were up to me, I would have just stayed the course. But there's something about talent that makes other people grab ahold and claim their share, somehow. It really boils down to the fact that my parents were bound and determined that one of their children was a wunderkind of some sort. And I was the one that panned out," she peered into her mug. "I suppose if I wouldn't have pulled it off then they would have kept trying. Like manifest destiny or something."

"That must have been something for your brothers and sisters," Max squeezed an enormous glop of honey into his coffee, then returned the plastic bear to the center of the table.

"Oh, it had to have been. It had to have been eviscerating. My parents used to take me with them to their friend's houses for grown-up parties. You know? Real fondue, Pictionary-type crowds. I'd do math problems and things like that on a small chalkboard and the people would clap and then I'd curtsy. I was like a walking parlor trick. But my parents always left them with a sitter," she gave herself applause. "I'm actually pretty sure that's why the other two are so close—mutual dislike of their kid sister. I was like some sort of retroactive measuring stick for the both of them. If you'd ask my parents to this day about

their children they'll make excuses for Margot and George Jr.. It isn't like they didn't have the exact same upbringing and meals that I did, same schools, same aunties and uncles. And *Mrs.* McKinley's the worst of the two of them about it. It's practically how she introduces me to people. Little Jemmie: our genius."

"I don't know what I'd do if they said that I was that smart when I was that young," he shook his head, still mired in disbelief and then raised his hands to the stucco-ceilinged God overhead. "The powers that be."

"That's the thing about it," she clapped her hands onto her thighs. "What do you do with that besides rub it in other people's faces? It's like the ultimate trump card. But, I think that it was the worst thing that could have happened to me. I mean they tell you that and where do you go from there?"

"Hey," Max closed his eyes and plugged his fingers in his ears. "Read my mind."

He enveloped her when they slept in the same bed. He was so much larger and longer than her. She loved that stuff.

Jemmie heard a faint ring and then Max left the bed. He quickly shuffled over the cold tile floor into the living room to answer the phone. This was the first weekend that they'd forgotten to unplug the telephone. She pretended to sleep but couldn't ignore the low rumble and burr of Max's voice. She could see him pacing through the living room. He was only wearing his underwear, obviously cold, trying to hurry the conversation along. He was using his artificial tone, answering in short sentences, laughing, punctuating nearly all of the other party's statements with "no problem," "absolutely," and "awesome." Max "mmmhmmm"-ed and "sounds good"-ed no less than four times before finally hanging up the phone. He returned to bed and enshrouded himself in covers facing Jemmie. They faced one another but didn't speak. The warm pocket of blankets and sheets was disrupted. She groaned at his touch but didn't avoid it. Jemmie was amazed at the way that Max fit her. His hands seemed perfectly designed to the proportions of her breasts. No deficit. No surplus. She smiled at the very real possibility that his genetic profile was

designed with her specifically in mind. She didn't bother asking who it was.

"Your sister," he kissed her forehead. "Told me to remind you that it's ninety-nine percent perspiration. She said that you'd know exactly what that means," he struggled to get back into his prior comfortable position. "She also assured me that she was certain that this was the year that you were going to find the thing that really set you off and that there would then be hell to pay. To whom," Max huffed. "I do not know."

Jemmie covered his mouth with her hand. She could feel the soft sucking sensation of his lips against her palm. It reminded her of the sound of goldfish sucking at the skin of water when feeding.

"I don't understand those people," Jemmie said. "Any of them. All of them. They think that just because they're rearranging themselves that Jemmie has to drop everything that she's doing and jump on board with it and I don't see that happening whatsoever. It tears them apart that I have something that's mine and that they can't latch on to."

"Give her the benefit of the doubt, Jemmie. They obviously love you," he struggled to fight away a yawn. "Exceedingly."

It was too early to get out of bed yet. Max's apartment was drafty and cold usually up until noon. The silky cobwebs in the corners of his ceiling fluttered with each gust of wind. He employed a single space heater, which supplied a steady stream of warmth to a very limited area.

"Well, what else did she say?"

"She said that she was thinking of dropping by to see you sometime."

She raised her head. "How soon is 'sometime'?"

"She wondered if the latter part of next week would work."

"And let me guess, Max, you thought that was an 'awesome' idea?" She was out of the bed, searching for her clothes on the floor. "You really don't get it, do you?"

"And what exactly was I supposed to do? She tracked you down to my apartment and called me on a Sunday morning to ask if her sister was still alive, Jemmie. She knows where you are. She could have easily just stopped by and waited you out."

She hit him with her jeans. "Margot likes to play both sides, Max. I really think that she and George Jr. get together and do nothing besides laugh at me and do impressions of me. I really do. I'm certain they do, actually. I'm positive. She probably needs some new material."

"I find that highly unlikely," Max said.

"They think that because they've finally found careers and are starting to pay off their student loans that they're the ones who've panned out and that all of a sudden that I'm the dud. Just like that now," she clapped her hands. "I'm the runt. And I am not the runt, Max. Every time I talk to Margot she makes it seem like I'm two steps away from the Nobel Prize or something. She pretends to be so happy for me. And she does this thing where she . . . she, pats me on the shoulder, like in a 'Oh, sure you are, kiddo. Sure you are. There there.' kind of way, like she doesn't have the heart to disagree with me or tell me how silly I am. I just want it to stop. All of it. I'm not the one who wanted to take those stupid fucking tests. My parents did. I feel like reminding all of them that sometimes. I didn't have any say in the procedure besides identifying sequences."

"Well, if she didn't call and ask about you then you'd be complaining about how no one ever cared and how you had so much potential and how no one ever challenged you or believed in you or expected anything out of you."

"She started it."

Jemmie surveyed the room. Maxwell made no attempts at moving or chasing after her. "What else was she talking about?"

"The recession," Max rolled over and faced her. "She's really broken up about the recession. The oil spill, too, really. She said that she's thinking of going down to help clean. But, she didn't go into a lot of detail. She doesn't really know me. I think she was gasping at straws, you know?"

"Fuck the recession," she clasped her bra behind her back with one hand. "What did she say about George Jr.?"

"She didn't say anything about him at all. Didn't mention him once. She obviously wanted to talk to you but I told her that you were out getting groceries."

"There's no way that she believed that, Max."

"It's the thought that counts."

"My parents?" she studied herself in the mirror, smoothed her hair out behind her ears.

Maxwell turned to face her and looked to her as if to make sure that she'd been the one who broached the subject. She widened her eyes to reinforce the fact that she'd not only asked him a question but was waiting for its answer, hands placed firmly on her hips.

"Your mother's gingivitis is improving, slowly but surely," he smiled, shielded his eyes with his arm. His voice was still froggy from sleep. "Your father was training for a 10-K and twisted his ankle pretty bad but its nothing terribly serious. Nothing to worry yourself over. She assured me."

Quadrilateral slats of light were poking through Max's Venetian blinds. The space heater churned in a low-pitched hum.

"Well, is he going to run the race or not?"

"I assumed from the way that your sister talked that it was severe enough that he was advised not to run in the race."

"So, he did all of that training and then 'No', just like that?"

Max covered his head with a pillow for a moment, then removed it and reclined against it.

"Give me a cigarette," she rummaged through her purse. "I'm all out, give me one of yours."

He reached for his pants and then flung the carton just past her. It skidded across the floor. "You're not going to have anything to look forward to if you smoke one now," he reminded her.

"I'm not going to need anything to look forward to if I smoke one now, Maxwell," she corrected him.

"You're lucky to have your niche already carved out for you and all."

"You're lucky that your family gives you basic space. That'd be a godsend."

"My parents aren't giving me any more money," he motioned for his cigarettes.

"What do you mean?" she pulled the carton back away from his reach.

"They're cutting me off at semester."

"At semester?"

Max nodded in agreement.

"Why now? Why all of a sudden?" Jemmie asked. There was a small lilt in her mouth that hinted toward disbelief.

"I haven't gone to any classes since, what, the second or third week of school, Jemmie?" He struggled to laugh. "Finals are just around the corner and I have absolutely no intention of squeezing those textbooks into this melon. Not gonna happen."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I haven't cracked a book all semester. I just thought that . . . I hoped, rather, that you'd already connected the dots." His black mop of hair was misshapen and matted from sleep.

Jemmie's eyes searched for the punchline as if he would soon smile, then crack into outright laughter so that they might return to the problem at hand. She searched the bed-spread, then the floor, and then tried to straighten herself out as if to prove that she'd expected this much. "Then what?" she asked.

"I'll move out. Move home. Hang out. Try something else. Beats me. Get a job. What about you?" he was now sitting upright in the bed. The scraggly hair on his chest was only dense in the spots where his T-shirts didn't rub. It created a pattern that she didn't recognize.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what are you going to do with yourself?"

"In the future or right now?" she managed to ask. She'd always hated answering a question with a question.

"Both," he said. "Either or. I dunno. You stopped going to classes before I did."

This was the first shadow of doubt that Max had expressed toward her. She had become somehow dependent on his belief that she was smart enough to pull off anything and that she somehow transcended worry. This lapse in reverence registered on her face, furrowed her brow.

"I guess I'm going to go study," she said, searching for her backpack. "Make a go of it, at least. Maybe if I don't sleep for the next few weeks I can pull off a miracle."

"Guns blazing," Max nodded in agreement at her. "Sounds about right."

"I don't even know when my finals are," she confessed. "Thanks for the heads-up on everything else, though."

"It isn't like that, Jemmie. There just isn't a right way to say some things," he crossed his hands behind his head. "Most things, actually."

"All the same," she removed the cigarettes from his carton. She twisted the filters off in one twist and then rolled the tubes together between her palms as if she were trying to start a fire. The tiny brown filaments of tobacco chafed and spread over the floor. She didn't bother closing the front door on her way out.

Jemmie's hair was oily. It hung limp and shiny like a pelt on her shoulder. She holed herself up in the campus library for two hours in a small cubicle, but couldn't focus on any of the readings from her Cultures & Traditions seminar. She flipped through her notebooks struggling for a starting point. Most of her notes were scattered with doodling, sketches, scattered lyrics to songs. She read the first page of "Coming of Age in Samoa" nearly ten times and had both underlined and highlighted it in its entirety. She took a Valium and became frightened when she didn't feel any relief.

She went to the bathroom and locked the door behind her. She splashed cold water on her face and the back of her neck, then drank straight from the faucet. Stop being ridiculous, she thought. Stop freaking the fuck out. Jemmie was experiencing the sort of queasiness and anxiety that too much caffeine combined with too many cigarettes elicit on an empty stomach. She wanted some sort of relief. She placed her two predominant fingers into her mouth, without overthinking and gagged immediately. Then she heard someone knock on the door and say, "Is everything alright in there?" The person sounded annoyed, not concerned. For a brief moment, Jemmie considered climbing out the small window overlooking the single stall but realized that it was painted shut and that the muffled conversation outside the door was about her. The person knocked again and then tried to open the door, hastily. Jemmie fixed herself in the mirror and rinsed her fingers off. She left a wet hand-print on the door when she pushed it open. Outside, were a young man and woman on either side of the door. Jemmie raised a sheepish, apologetic hand and

avoided eye contact, from a distance she heard him say "... with sugar on top and a million cherries." By the time she was a comfortable-enough distance away to look back, a hand was pulling the door closed behind them.

Jemmie gathered her things quickly and stuffed them into her oversized bag. She hurried down the stairs. There was a bust of the school's bald-headed founder in the middle of the library's main floor. She quickly swiped her hand across his bronze dome for luck and hurried out the doubl -doors. It was the type of balmy, Midwestern evening that she hoped that she would have gotten used to by now.

Students were walking across the mall in poofy, unflattering ski jackets and sweatpants, carrying Styrofoam platters full of cafeteria food along with them. She could see their warm breath condensing in the air. The chapel bells were clanging. All of the lights in the Humanities building were on. She decided that her only viable resort was to throw herself onto the mercy of any available faculty member who would listen and explain her circumstances. If I have to, I'll tell them that my grandfather died last night, she thought. I'll tell them that I just found out that I have a rare, incommunicable disease of the liver and/or pancreas.

She hadn't run in quite some time and the air stung at the back of her mouth and into her throat. She instantly got the feeling that the flu was sinking into her. Jemmie climbed the steps quickly and tried to breathe warm air into her fingers. At the top of the stairs was a cluster of bulletin boards. It was full of advertisements for internships and off-campus study. There was also a section dedicated to the Polaroid pictures of students who were majoring in the Humanities. Only the pictures of juniors and seniors appeared, underclassmen majors' names appeared on a typed sheet of white paper. Jemmie found her name and rubbed her finger over it to blur the ink.

The doors to the faculty offices were wide open. She surveyed each room and found them all empty. Jemmie could hear the groan of a vacuum cleaner on the far side of the building, saw its plug extending from the outlet next to Ms. Dodson's office—the department

chair. She knocked on the door to be safe and then ducked into the office. There was a worn spot in the wooden floor as soon as she stepped inside. She remembered how nervous she was during her first meeting with Ms. Dodson. There were no novelty shrunken heads or suggestive fertility statues in her office like she'd remembered.

There was a black sports coat on the back of the door that Jemmie exchanged for her flimsy jacket. Ms. Dodson was much larger than Jemmie and the coat nearly engulfed her. Ms. Dodson had a small closet that Jemmie perused and found nothing of interest in. Jemmie then sat at her desk. She looked through the drawers. She wanted to find her grade book, perhaps her old tests, aspirin, something, anything. What she found was a large container of pretzel rods in the bottom drawer along with a jar of peanut butter.

She surveyed the pictures Ms. Dodson had on her desk. In the first, Ms. Dodson was fighting off a handsome man playfully attempting to kiss her. In another, Ms. Dodson was waving at the camera while on top of a camel with the pyramids in the horizon. The last picture was of Ms. Dodson in the middle of class, she was pointing a finger out to a student, chalk in her hand, licking her upper lip with happiness. Jemmie placed this picture face-down on the table, then the others. She picked up her phone and listened to its dial tone. She could call anyone, right this second, and it would be official university business.

Jemmie grabbed Ms. Dodson's oversized glasses from the table and put them on. She walked outside the office and unplugged the vacuum. She followed its cord into the Religion department. By the time she got to the vacuum, a young black man was on the ground with the vacuum flipped onto its back. He was rotating the spool of the machine's underside. A screwdriver was next to him on the ground.

Jemmie cleared her throat and startled him.

"Is this absolutely necessary, sir?" she asked. The security of Ms. Dodson's coat somehow made her more comfortable.

"I apologize. I don't usually clean this one. I'm usually in the science building. The usual girl quit. She usually does it really, really bright and early. I just can't swing it yet."

"Why did she quit, Danny?" Jemmie asked, removing the glasses and examining the embroidered name on his shirt pocket.

"I think she just found something better," he seemed flummoxed. "She probably just didn't like it here."

"What didn't she like about it?"

"Between you and me, most people in this line of work are burning the days."

"Well, I'm doing parent conferences over the phone right now," Jemmie said. She clutched Ms. Dodson's pair of reading glasses in her hands as if it were some bobble of rare antiquity and great value. "And I can't quite concentrate with all of this going on."

"I'll be out of your hair in less than half an hour," Danny hunkered back to the vaccuum.

"Could you do me a huge favor?" Jemmie asked.

"It depends on the favor."

"It'll only take a second."

When they reached Ms. Dodson's room Jemmie motioned for the man to sit down across the desk from her. She picked up the phone and cradled it between her neck and shoulder. She punched in ten numbers and then waited for the dial tone.

"I think you might have to dial '9' to make outside calls, professor," he smiled at her.

Jemmie slapped an apologetic palm to her forehand and redialed the number.

"These people are notoriously rude and I think that the man of the house might well be a misogynist," Jemmie held the phone's receiver. "He won't accept any criticism about his daughter. And I'm really worried about her."

"Ma'am," the custodian raised his hand to slow the situation. "Let's both show our cards here."

"What do you mean?" Jemmie asked.

"You aren't any more of a teacher here than I am."

Jemmie plopped into the plush, leather office chair. "Was it that obvious?"

"You barely look old enough to attend here, let alone teach," he

rubbed his head in disbelief. "You could have at least used one of the adjunct offices. I could have maybe possibly bought that one."

"I could be a teacher here if I wanted to," Jemmie said. "They certainly aren't reinventing the wheel."

"Who were you going to have me call for you?" Danny asked.

"Does it matter?"

"It might. Try me."

"I wanted you to call my parents and tell them that you're worried about me, or that I'm failing my classes, or that you think I may be pregnant. I wanted you to scare them a little is all."

"Are you really failing your classes?" Danny asked.

"Famously," Jemmie placed her hand over her chest as if taking a pledge, reciting some sacred vow.

"You aren't pregnant are you?" he asked.

"Not that I know of."

"Do they at least have it coming?"

"Famously."

Jemmie heard her father's groggy voice on the other line and shoved the phone over to Danny. She covered her mouth in mild disbelief. He flared his eyes, which let her know that he didn't know what to say.

"McKinley's the name. Tell them that their daughter is struggling in your anthropology course and most of her other studies that you know of," she whispered. She held her hands over her mouth.

"Sir," he began. "Yeah, your daughter isn't doing so hot in my class. Well, yes. She's already explained that to me."

Jemmie waited for her father's reaction.

Danny's eyes flared again.

Jemmie coached, "Tell him that you're just calling out of concern and, as a parent yourself, you felt compelled."

"Well, sir. I'm just calling because I'm worried is all," he twirled in the office chair. "I've got kids myself and I know how it is." He covered the phone's receiver for his next direction.

"Tell him that she doesn't seem to have any regard for herself, anymore. Tell him that she has all the talent in the world but doesn't

choose to do anything with it. Tell him it's the most egregious abuse of talent that you've ever witnessed. Tell her that you've never encountered this problem in all your years of teaching. Tell him that you're just so frustrated that you felt you had to touch base. You wouldn't be able to sleep tonight if you didn't get in contact with someone."

Danny extended his finger to halt her diatribe. In turns, Danny agreed with Mr. McKinley, shook his head in commiseration, and audibly sucked his teeth in disbelief. He cupped his hand over the mouthpiece and whispered to Jemmie, "His wife just picked up on the other line." The only way she resisted laughing out loud at this was turn around from the man and bite the insides of her lips together. She rose from Ms. Dodson's chair and looked out the window. She heard the young man agree, "Yes, ma'am," Danny said. "Most definitely. More than you could ever imagine, ma'am."

Jemmie wanted to be home. This minute. This moment. She wanted to watch her parents in adjacent rooms argue with themselves about themselves in front of this sanitation engineer. Then they'd hang up their respective phones and meet at the dining room table. Her father would drop two tablets of seltzer into a large glass of warm water. They'd remain silent and watch the fizzing. Mrs. McKinley would grab his hand and squeeze it in a reassuring way. But, he wouldn't squeeze hers in return. They would remain that way. To a casual observer, they would seem to be two people submerged in prayer or entrenched in the inaudible frenzy of mourning. And that, Jemmie decided, would be more than enough.

Spring Breaks

Alissa Quart

This beach, an old
song. Hunters look
for fortunes under sandy Buds,
days are day-
glo, cars are topless.
See your face
in the mirrored yacht floor?
Dipsomaniac mothers mouth
"ring my bell," injured,
on the shore, sands holding
our armpit skull tattoos,
rocking little bods, our shaved-
chest-zoo, as poolside,
aging cling to dwindling
heat. Our kids' thick
flesh pelts twice
our size. All our sport
shirts point to always sitting
still. Particles, fried,
bored, alive.

Can we refuse ourselves?
Millennial bland angels
tech-tonically tapping, our sweat-
free abalone blouses,
signatured water?
Neon-hearted: let us be

shielded. Here, where
the naughts end,
unnoticed, where yachts
hope shiningly un-bought.
All owners at risk. All trying
to float. This beach's
un-dimpled flesh exists
for death cult ex-marines,
for illustrated boyfriends,
for ruin. It's waiting for
something to rise
again. You will only
reproduce your life.

My Own Private Idaho

Identity politics' age
of innocence. Track-marked
novelists slumbered, their hair
flopped, their shirts autumnal,
all the color of rocks, cavorting
like field mice. Leaving burning
houses in Tulsa or ashen
trailer parks in Oregon.
How long could it go on
before the designer
drug deaths, the Shakespearean
surfers, the Phoenixes on
the carrion of their brother's
slacker longeur? *Mala*
Noche now a nightclub.

We were a short
story of better
commerce, a human
collage of natural
cigarettes, Budapest
hickeys, cool
hunting manuals,
Dirtsploitation.
The fucked up face
of the landscape was ours.

The Terms

Middle-aged men make good bad mothers.

People are just showtunes looking for a show.

The word "classic" accompanies the word "commercial," after 1943.

Writers are still worrying about the word not meeting the thing it describes. Who else cares.

Even yoked beasts have private thoughts.

All thoughts are interruptions.

Lowrider

For Jeff and Alysia

After the hot spot of surplus
we are bodies again.
Caught on the gears
of ten years ago.
Forced by scarcity
to be younger while
ever aging.
Poverty's paraphrase.

At first, bad
bosses. Their offices
entered us, hair in our
faces, running air quote
fiestas, betrayed by
the trusts, forgotten
by second wavers,
their tears for their stale-
mate. With foundering Lib
we turned creatures
of code, of lowriders
and footers.
Template nothings.
Garbage: our poetic
resource. Coining words,
now for savings. Or something
that should be saved.

Holiday

Overcame "the year of choice"
through tragedy's single outcome.
Dank gray carpet nubs
heroin chic rictus.
Hid in the revival
house, covering
misgivings with theatrical
paint. As Ann Hardy says in
Holiday, "When there's smoke
there's usually someone smoking."

The antic, panoramic mirror
of '94: it held boffins in
checkered overcoats, who spoke
American actor British.
Always imitating, I wore
frocks thin enough to
escape, all post-partisan nervosa.
My immigrant students
learned American confessions.
A radical prof told me incorrect
English renewed language.
A Scottish deaf woman lip
read only dialect. I corrected
social class through Anglican
boyfriends that insisted
they were aliens.

Asked my books' covers
if I could go home.
Tried telling captivity
stories without breaking
out. All dittos
were for classroom use.
My youth a cut-away
shot, a thing on loan,
like library books
in resort towns.

The old Buddhist poet
lost half his malignant
tongue. Other aged
Modernists had obits
like dried hydrangeas.
I was a parlor
room comedy, exploded
from the inside, all gauze
dresses, all typed copies.
Who was grading?
The answer key buried
in the second act's
potted palm.
If I did it well
it was an imitation.

Jump

Ann Packer

ALEJANDRO WAS THIN LIKE A TEENAGER, WITH SKINNY SHOULDERS and skinny legs and no butt. His black hair lay against his scalp in long, wavy strands and hung so low on his forehead it almost reached his eyes. "I got cables," he cried in response to Carolee's announcement, his hand up and waving like a school kid's. "I can help you."

It was a little after midnight, and her car was dead. Beggars weren't supposed to be choosers, but did she really want Alejandro's help? Here at work he messed up all the time, making 150 copies when a customer wanted fifteen, jamming the self-service machines when he tried to add paper. She couldn't believe he hadn't been fired.

"What's the matter, Carolee?" one of the other guys said. "Alejandro said he can help."

Alejandro turned away, eyes downcast, front teeth pulling at his lower lip. She'd trained him when he first started, almost a year ago, and she felt sort of responsible for him. It wasn't just that she'd been around longer than he had—she'd been around longer than anyone, including her boss. It was more, he was the runt of the litter and she hated watching anyone get bullied.

She gave him a swift nod and they headed for the exit, Alejandro trotting beside her and then darting ahead to push open the door. "Yo, Chavez," someone called after them. "No funny business."

The moon was high and bright, and a cold wind blew bits of debris around the nearly empty parking lot. Carolee turned up the lapels of her flimsy jacket and clutched them close. She hated her heavy coat so much she'd ditched it at the first false note of spring.

They began walking. An empty Vitamin Water bottle lay in their path, and Alejandro paused to step on it and gave her a huge grin when he saw he'd flattened it. He said, "You're lucky I'm even here tonight. Usually on Fridays I'm wit my friends doin airsoft."

"Airsoft?

He stared at her with disbelief, his thin face pinched from the cold. He had smooth olive cheeks and the beginnings of a fine, silky mustache that never seemed to grow. He said, "Carolee, you gotta be kiddin. It's guns—Not real—It's so fun, you gotta go wit me sometime."

He told her about the empty shopping mall where he and his buddies played late at night, its businesses shuttered, a giant FOR LEASE sign facing the highway. There were recessed doorways perfect for ambushes, vacant loading docks. He said, "My boy Gordo's a security guard, he lets us in."

"Hope he doesn't like his job," Carolee said.

"Why, cuz he could lose it? Gordo's smart, he ain't gonna get caught."

He was parked at the far end of the lot, his boxy old Nissan just a few spots from her battered Hyundai. By the time they got there she had to pee, though she'd peed right before she clocked out, like ten minutes ago.

He swung open his trunk. "Fuck me."

Inside were a bicycle wheel lying on its side, a mess of dirty clothes, a six-pack of off-brand cola. No jumper cables.

"I know I had 'em," he said. "Somebody musta stole 'em."

She turned to go. She had a theory that any one bad thing made it likelier more bad things would happen. Her dead car had set her up. She said, "I'll figure something else out."

"Carolee, no, we can go borrow some. Gordo has some."

"It's fine, Alejandro."

"Or I can drive you home and go get 'em after, bring you back tomorrow. You working tomorrow?"

She wasn't. And she really had to pee, the feeling like a knife slice now. Plus it was incredibly cold. In the morning she could probably find someone with cables at her apartment building, get a ride back up here and deal with her car then. All she was supposed to do tomorrow was stop by her mom's. There was some project her mom had in mind for the two of them, labeling photos, reorganizing a closet—the kind of thing Carolee thought of as playing with the past, as if the past were a doll and the two of them were putting dress-up clothes on it, combing its hair so it would look pretty.

She said to Alejandro, "I live in Sunnyvale."

He opened the passenger door, and she got in, the car smelling of old French fries and air freshener. He settled into the driver's seat and wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Finally I get you in my car."

"Do *not* do that."

He held up both palms, backed away from the curb, and drove straight across the painted lines of a dozen parking places. Leaving the lot, he gave her a worried glance from under the fringe of his hair and faced the road again.

Now she felt bad; he was just doing what guys did. And he looked so hangdog, slumped in the seat, steering with the heel of one hand.

She said, "So this airsoft war. It's teams?"

He looked over and grinned. "Every man for himself."

"But you help Juan."

"I help Juan and Iggy. Gordo helps me."

"Gordo helps you but you don't help him?"

"He don't need help."

And on he went, like the little kids she used to babysit, who talked and talked, and then talked more as bedtime got closer. He basically was a kid: twenty-two at the most, whereas she'd turn thirty in less than a month, and what a good time that was going to be. Her mom kept saying they'd go out somewhere really nice, just the two of them, like that was the solution and not the problem.

They drove past a gas station, and Carolee wondered if she should offer to buy him some. "You got a full tank?"

"Yeah."

Another gas station, complete with a big bright mini-mart.

"Can we stop for a sec?"

"I said I'm good."

"Not for gas."

He turned to her with wide eyes. "Carolee, no. You're my role model, you can't smoke."

"I don't smoke. You can keep it running, I'll only be a sec."

The cashier was an old guy, sitting on a stool with his neck arched so he could watch a TV mounted to the ceiling. Carolee ducked into the bathroom. It was dank and freezing, with scattered puddles on the concrete floor. There was nowhere she wanted to put her purse, so she held the strap between her teeth as she lowered her thighs to the frigid seat. At first if felt good letting the urine out, but as she finished it burned, a sure sign, and she knew she had a bad night ahead.

The store light was bright and ugly. She found the grocery aisle and scanned the shelves, hating the way boxes of food looked in these places, the yellows and cardboard reds.

Alejandro stood empty-handed at the register, leaning on one elbow. When he saw her he stood up straight. "What you got, juice?"

She flashed the label at him.

"Cranberry juice. Guess you got a infection, huh?"

"Alejandro!"

"You don't?"

She set the juice on the counter and fished in her purse. In the mirror behind the register she saw how she towered over Alejandro, all 5'10" of her. She felt like his mother. As she was pulling bills from her wallet he reached across her to a plastic tub of Slim Jims. "On you?" he said. "Thanks, boss."

"I'm not your boss."

"You are. You're my boss lady."

It seemed even colder when they got back outside. She hated "boss lady." She was shift manager, which—despite the flow chart she'd made for the online business class she took a few years back—meant next to nothing. Shift manager at the idiotically named Copy Copy, her thirtieth birthday coming soon—she was kicking ass.

Back in the car, she unscrewed the top of the cranberry juice and drank from its too-wide opening, the juice sweet-sharp, with that drying effect. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

He said, "Carolee, I hate to tell you, cranberry juice ain't gonna fix it."

She looked over at him, sitting behind the wheel, a serious look on his face. "You're a doctor now?"

He shrugged and sat there nibbling on the Slim Jim. Another car pulled in next to them, and the driver got out, a man in his fifties with thick, disheveled hair and the ruined nose of an alcoholic. He spoke through his open door, waving his hand like he was excited or upset, and when he moved away Carolee got a quick glimpse of his passenger, a black-and-white mutt with floppy ears.

She'd left clothes in the washer, she just remembered. Put them in last night when she got home from work and forgot all about them. Evenings she worked late, she was sometimes so fried she didn't even eat, or she ate crap from the freezer: Hot Pockets, Bagel Bites, stuff she bought for emergencies. Her laundry would've been taken from the washer by now, left wet in her basket if she was lucky or just dumped on the floor. She hated her apartment. Every now and then she thought of trying to move north, closer to work, but it was like the idea of signing up for some classes again—it wouldn't make a big enough difference, so why bother?

She turned to Alejandro. "So are we going?"

He didn't respond, his expression glazed, the Slim Jim drooping from the corner of his mouth.

"Yo," she said.

"What?"

"Are we going?"

He shook, or shivered—it was like a wet dog trying to dry off. Moving slowly, he started the car, put it in reverse, and pulled out of the gas station, but when he came to the on-ramp for the freeway he turned right.

"Wait, what're you—"

"Shortcut."

There was no shortcut to Sunnyvale, and her pulse picked up a little. Was this going to turn out bad, woman killed by coworker on deserted street? She thought of a Monday morning when she got to work early, and Alejandro and the other night-shift guy were sitting on opposite counters, tossing a roll of packing tape back and forth. When he saw her he hopped down and gave her a big smile. "Hey, Carolee," he said, "come and kiss me, just right here"—he tapped his cheek twice—"'cause I know you love me."

He wasn't a maniac. A fuck-up but not a maniac. And maybe not such a fuck-up, either—for him he was probably doing well, just having his job. She was pretty sure he was first generation, with parents who didn't peak English.

She was in pain again, and she shifted in her seat, trying to get comfortable. She had swiped some sleeping pills from her mom's medicine cabinet, and this was definitely the night to try one. Either that or lie awake watching the clock. She was pretty sure Kaiser opened at nine on Saturdays. At 9:01 she'd call for some Cipro.

He said, "What you doing tomorrow?"

"Nothing. Dealing with my car." Maybe she'd skip the stop at her mom's, though then she'd have to hear the usual moaning, *What's the point of having you close by if I never see you?*

"No, after that," Alejandro said. "Later. We should go out. You wanna go to a movie? I ain't hittin' on you, I swear."

She looked over at him, sitting there all thin and hopeful. Did he really think she'd go out with him, even as friends? They were so different: age, race, everything. What would they talk about, airsoft wars? She said, "You've got to be kidding."

He didn't react, but she could see something was going on; he was too still, too quiet.

"What?" she said.

He turned and stared into her eyes. "Why are you such an icicle, lady?"

At first she was surprised—Alejandro stepping up—but that gave way to regret. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's late. Don't listen to me."

On they drove, past heavy trees on one side of the road and a big wall on the other. The streetlights were far apart, and they were the

fancy kind, with curly iron things spiraling on top of the globes. At a T intersection, she looked in both directions and saw more walls, more trees.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Atherton."

"Why are we in Atherton?"

The light turned green, and he made a left and passed through a giant stone gate. Now they were somewhere residential, but quiet, wealthy, spread-out residential, with smaller closed gates at driveways every hundred yards or so, and, way back from the gates, the smudgy outlines of giant houses. Atherton was where the rich people lived, the richest people, richer even than the kids Carolee had gone to school with in Palo Alto. Atherton kids went to private schools. They drove brand-new cars and walked in gilded groups through the pricey Stanford Shopping Center, where Carolee had her first job, cashiering at a gourmet hot dog stand. In those days, Carolee's richest friend was Tamara Bevin, and she said her parents had chosen Palo Alto over Atherton or Woodside because they wanted her and her brother to learn about the real world. Carolee and her mom lived in the thin strip of south Palo Alto that ran between El Camino and the railroad tracks, where the houses were small and close together and you could hear shouts many nights, and cars roaring up and down the streets—and she knew that was about as real as Palo Alto ever got.

Alejandro stopped at a driveway. He reached up to his sun visor, and the gate swung inward.

"What the fuck?" Carolee said.

"*Mi casa.*"

The car crunched over gravel and slowed as a huge white cake of a house came into view, with pillars and a covered entryway, and a massive double door flanked by glowing lanterns. He cut the engine, and they looked at each other.

She said, "You live here."

"My mommy and daddy do. Come on, I gotta make a stop."

Inside the house it was dark, though there was a light on somewhere near the back, so dim it might be nothing more than a nightlight. He

moved fast, and she picked up her pace, trailed him through an enormous living room, twice the size of her entire apartment, and through a corridor that led to a vast kitchen, with stoves and ovens and sinks and refrigerators at one end and couches and easy chairs and a huge flat-screen TV at the other, where a small, dark-haired woman sat watching some show with the sound off, her tiny body enveloped by a splashily flowered robe, white with giant red and orange flowers that gleamed in the near dark.

"Sandro," she said, leaping to her feet and switching on a lamp. "*Madre de dios.*"

"*Mami.*" He crossed the room and kissed her cheeks.

Her hands fluttered from her face to his face to the pockets of her robe. Her skin was a darker olive than his, her eyes deeply black and ringed with shadows.

"Sandro, you almost gave me a heart attack. What's wrong, what is it?"

He said something to her in Spanish, and they went back and forth, speaking rapidly. Alejandro gestured at Carolee, and the woman came over and held out her hand. She was maybe 4' 11", and she had tiny, almost nonexistent breasts; she could have passed for a child if it weren't for the blurriness of her aging face.

"You are most welcome," she said. "How do you do? I am Alejandro's mother."

Carolee took the hand, which was cold and soft and seemed to slip from her grasp the moment she touched it. Was she the maid? No, she wasn't the maid, and Alejandro was not the person he pretended to be. All these months Carolee had assumed he was from the Latino part of Redwood City, near the taquerias and bodegas. He obviously *wanted* people to assume it, with his cholo talk.

"Carolee," the woman said. "In Spanish we have Carolina. Are you for Carolina?"

Carolee shook her head. She'd been named for her mom's parents, Carol and Lee. It was embarrassing, she never told anyone.

"You work at the photocopy shop?"

"She's the queen there," Alejandro cut in, speaking in perfect, unaccented English. "The queen of photocopies and expedited shipping services."

Carolee felt her face grow warm, but he turned to his mom and said, "*Donde esta Papi?*"

She gestured at the ceiling, and he left the room, his footsteps sounding on a flight of stairs.

Carolee looked at his mom. She used to know how to deal with people like this, rich and in every way out of her league; she got through school dealing with them, charming them, making sure she was *that nice girl Carolee* to all the parents she encountered because that was how she got to go places. "Mrs. Chavez," she said. "I'm sorry to intrude."

Alejandro's mom smiled. "It's Mitchell—Chavez is my maiden name. My son borrows it because he does not like Mitchell. But please, call me Raquel."

"Raquel," Carolee said. She repeated the apology, explaining about her dead car, but all she could think was what a liar Alejandro was. He'd faked this Latino homeboy thing and he'd changed his name to go with it? She was going to kill him. Her days of protecting him from the other guys at work, trying to sand the edges off their teasing? Over.

His mom was waiting.

"He was giving me a ride home," Carolee said, "and then suddenly we were here. I don't know why we stopped."

His mom's arched eyebrows went up. "For medicine. He didn't tell you?"

"Medicine?"

"He has a soft heart. He always has."

Carolee forced herself to smile, but things were going from bad to worse. What did Alejandro think he was going to do, dig up some old pills from an infection he'd had? He was a liar, and he was out of his mind.

She had to pee like crazy, and she looked around, wondering where the bathroom might be. Bathrooms. The sitting area was full of furniture, everything covered with flowers, gold tassels, big silk buttons.

Even the lampshades were flowered, and the lamp bases were painted with ladies holding parasols.

"May I use the bathroom?" she asked. "The restroom?"

Alejandro's mom showed her the way, reaching into a small pink-and-gold room and turning on a light. When she was gone Carolee closed the door. It hurt, and then it hurt a lot more as she finished. There were tiny linen hand towels, ironed, and rather than use one she dried her hands on her pants. She thought of a boy she dated in high school, from a rich family in Crescent Park, and remembered going home with him for dinner one night; soon after they arrived the boy's mom suggested he show her *the restroom* so she could *freshen up*. She didn't know what that meant, freshen up, but she figured she must look dirty, so in the bathroom she took a small fringed cloth—terry, not as fancy as this one—and wetted it thoroughly to scrub her face, realizing only afterward that it was a handtowel and not a washcloth. "They sound very la-di-da," her mom said when she got home and described the evening. Carolee had liked the boy: David Connell, with his straight dark hair and his voice that still cracked sometimes. He ran track; she met him after practice most afternoons, and they made out behind the tennis courts until it was time for him to go into the gym to shower. She remembered loving his intense sweat smell, the damp of his shirt. But after that dinner with his family she broke up with him, saying she needed more time to study. It was a good excuse: it was junior year, everyone was working like crazy. No one had to know the truth, which was that it made her too nervous, the threat of being found out.

It was after one a.m. She decided that when she got back to the kitchen she'd excuse herself to Mrs. Mitchell, call a taxi, and just eat the fare, thirty bucks, forty, whatever it would be. Alejandro she would deal with later.

But when she returned she found not just Mrs. Mitchell but also Alejandro and a short, stocky white man with thick eyeglasses, standing there in blue pajamas and a bathrobe, looking recently awoken and very disgruntled. Someone had turned on the room lights, and it was bright now, almost like a stage set.

"Dees ees her, dees ees Carolee," Alejandro said, diving back into the accent. He came and put his hand behind her elbow. "You OK, lady? You wanna sit down?"

She glared at him. "I'm fine. I need to get home, I'm going to call a taxi."

"No, no. *Mi padre* is gonna help you."

"Now listen—" the man said, casting a furious look at Alejandro's mom.

"My father,'" Mrs. Mitchell said.

"My father," Alejandro said, switching now to the low, robotic tone of an automated phone system. "My father. Is going. To help you."

His father was going to help her. His father was going to help her because . . . he was a doctor. *You're a doctor now?* she'd said to Alejandro, mocking him. Would she have believed him if he'd said, *No, but my dad is*? He'd set her up, brought her here to expose her prejudice. Her assumptions. He was showing her.

Or was he? She looked at the three of them, Alejandro and his beautiful Latina mother and his angry white father. She didn't think so. She didn't know what he was up to, but his eyes were brighter, his stance was straighter, his whole being was focused in a way she'd never seen before.

"I'm going to call a taxi," she said. "What's the address here?"

"Chica, no," he cried. "I ain't lettin' you pay for no taxi. You the boss lady."

"That's *enough*," his dad said.

But Alejandro ignored him and headed off toward the dark end of the kitchen, leaving the three of them just standing there. His dad gave his mom a furious glare, and, as if in response, she turned from him and called to Alejandro, "What are you looking for? I wish I'd known you were coming, I would have put some Limonata on ice."

Carolee saw a cluster of family photos on a table halfway across the room. They were mostly too far away to see clearly, except for a large one of a much younger Dr. Mitchell—still with a full head of hair, his face partly masked by a pair of aviator sunglasses—holding

a small boy in a swimming pool, both of them lit up with delight, the boy with his arms wrapped tight around the man's neck.

Alejandro came back with two beers. He handed one to Carolee and twisted off the cap of the other, leaning his head back for a long gulp.

"You're drinking," his dad said.

"Believe it or not, I can have a beer."

"Not in this house."

Mrs. Mitchell pulled a tissue from her pocket and dabbed at her eyes. "Robert," she said to her husband. "Please, I am begging."

Dr. Mitchell flushed. Under his eyes were pads of flesh the size of Carolee's baby toes.

Alejandro said, "You always told me I could come to you for help."

Dr. Mitchell turned and walked a few steps away. Watching from behind, Carolee saw how tense he was, his shoulders rising and then dropping heavily as he exhaled. He turned to her and said, "What's going on?"

"I'm sorry?"

"With your urinary tract. What are you experiencing?"

Heat filled her face as she explained her symptoms. She was furious at Alejandro for this. Still, she was on her best behavior, her voice calm, everything about her aimed at avoiding giving offense. Dr. Mitchell said it sounded like a UTI but she'd need to be tested, and she said, "They're kind of chronic. I'm pretty sure. I don't want to trouble you, I can call my doctor in the morning, that's what I was planning."

"Why don't you write a prescription," Mrs. Mitchell said to her husband. "Sandro can drive her to the twenty-four-hour Walgreens, everyone is happy."

"Uh uh," Alejandro said quickly, shaking his head. "Papi don't work like that. He got principles, he need to give her a pee-pee test first."

The room went so silent Carolee could hear a clock ticking somewhere, and outside, in a backyard she knew would be vast, some small night animal passing with a rustle of disturbed branches through a shrub.

Dr. and Mrs. Mitchell remained mute, staring at each other with what Carolee took to be easily revived hatred.

"Es complicado," Alejandro said happily.

They rode in Dr. Mitchell's Mercedes, Carolee and Alejandro both in the back seat like kids. The streets were dark and deserted. Dr. Mitchell drove with his hands at exactly ten and two o'clock. Alejandro was quiet, and out of the corner of her eye Carolee saw him picking at his cuticles. Saying goodbye to his mom, he had bowed his head and let her kiss him over and over again.

Dr. Mitchell's office was in Palo Alto, in a medical complex about four blocks from where David Connell's family had lived—maybe still lived. Carolee had no idea what had happened to him, besides the obvious. Everyone had gone to college except her.

It used to bug her, but it didn't anymore. Growing up, she'd always thought she'd go to college, and her mom sure thought it: Carolee was going to make her proud, reverse the family history by *not* getting pregnant in high school, *not* dropping out before graduation, *not* getting married and divorced in just eleven months. Carolee was going to go to college and maybe even graduate school . . . but she broke her arm at the first volleyball game of her senior year, and after that everything went to shit. She had a cast over her elbow, so she couldn't do her homework, couldn't write her applications, couldn't work the cash register at her job, and when spring came and everyone else was figuring out where they were heading for the next great thing, she had nowhere to go and no money to get there. The first year or two were hardest—she tried community college classes, hopped from one bad job to another, found some other losers to hang out with until she realized two of the guys were dealing meth—but things fell into place after that. Her mom said there was no shame in scaling back your plans, and most of the time Carolee believed her.

At the exterior door Dr. Mitchell flipped through the keys on his ring, and she shivered as she waited. He looked over at Alejandro. "Your friend is cold. Where are your manners?"

Alejandro looked as if he'd been struck, the sting of surprise making him go still for a moment. He shrugged off his peacoat and hand-

ed it to her. She didn't want it—a rough wool thing with chipped plastic buttons—but she draped it over her shoulders and avoided looking at either of them.

Inside, Dr. Mitchell led the way up a flight of stairs made of pebbled driveway concrete. He unlocked his suite and began flipping light switches, first in a small waiting room, then in an open area with a reception desk and file cabinets and a long counter with computers, and finally in his office, with its fancy furniture and large framed picture of Mrs. Mitchell on the wall, a beautiful twenty-five or thirty years old, with perfect golden skin and masses of black hair, but sad eyes, even then.

He came back into the open area and stopped abruptly. Looking hard at Carolee, he said, "He hasn't been to see his mother in a month. Did you know that? A month!" He stared for a long moment and then headed down a corridor and unlocked another door.

Alejandro shrugged, a kind of exaggerated, helpless, what-are-you-going-to-do? shrug, and she shrugged back. A moment later, his dad returned carrying a cup sealed in a plastic bag and a little foil envelope that looked like a condom. "Come on, genius," he said to Alejandro. "Show her the bathroom."

Alejandro led her down the hall to a spotless room with a handicapped toilet and a huge bottle of pink soap mounted to the wall. When she was finished she had to hand the cup to Dr. Mitchell and watch as he carried it away.

At the reception desk, Alejandro had taken a seat and was eating foil-wrapped chocolates from a glass bowl, unwrapping them and popping them into his mouth one after another. She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. She thought of the way his mom had leapt from her chair when he first appeared, and she wondered if Mrs. Mitchell sat there every night, in the same spot, waiting for him. Carolee's mom sort of did that, but with her it was a ratty mustard velour couch and a box of wine. "Classy," the last guy Carolee dated had said when they stopped by one evening. Then: "Hey, I'm only kidding"—but whatever, he was pretty much of an asshole, and she dumped him a week or two later. Which had its benefits, since not having sex meant a lot fewer UTIs. How she'd gotten this one, she

didn't know. It was her dead car. Or maybe it started with the UTI and the dead car followed from that.

"Chica," Alejandro whispered. His phone was in his palm; she was half-aware he'd been texting someone.

"What?"

"You wanna go by the mall after? The guys are still there."

She stared at him, Alejandro with his hair in his eyes, his shoulders swamped by a baggy black T-shirt. He looked as clueless and wishful as he had back at the copy shop, ready to forget the last two hours and power on.

She said, "Are you serious?"

His eyes widened. "I thought you were interested. You can play, Gordo has an extra gun."

She shook her head. "Do you not understand how mad I am? You don't just kidnap people."

He sighed and looked away. "I know." He reached into the bowl of chocolates and fingered through them as if there were a particular one he wanted to find. "I didn't think you'd go if I told you."

"You were right about that. You should keep your family shit to yourself."

"What? I wanted to help you."

"Right, and crawling up your dad's ass was just—a side thing."

He pushed his hair away from his face and looked even younger, his mustache a series of faint lines made with a tiny paintbrush. "It ain't a big deal. He just don't like how I live."

"Alejandro, stop talking like that! You blew your cover, how dumb do you think I am?"

He looked away. "Not as dumb as me."

"How dumb are you?"

"Pretty fuckin' dumb."

"Well, that's one true thing you've said. What's with the cholo act, anyway?"

He looked at her briefly and then looked away again. She wanted to walk out of there. She could hear his father pulling open a drawer, sliding stuff around like he was searching for something, trying to help her . . . and still, she was tempted to walk out right now.

Alejandro Chavez. Alejandro Chavez who was really Alejandro Mitchell, rich and only half white, which meant an extra advantage because you got to check a minority box on ethnicity questionnaires. He'd had everything, and where had he ended up? Working a shit job, driving a shit car, playing war games late at night in a shit shopping mall. What a waste.

She heard a sniff and looked up. He was staring down at the desk, eyes wide like he was trying to keep tears from falling. She said, "Oh, come on."

He shook his head and cupped his hands over his eyes.

"What?"

He bowed his head further and pressed his palms to his face. His shoulders began to shake, and she realized he wasn't faking. She hurried across the room and crouched next to him.

"Alejandro, please."

He shook his head.

"Your dad'll be out here any second. What's wrong, what's the matter?"

"Nothin."

"Something is."

He looked up with his eyes streaming. "I fuckin' *hate* him."

She patted his shoulder and tried to think of something to say, but somehow she was thinking of David Connell again, of that weird dinner with his family, and remembering that his older sister was there, visiting from wherever she was in school, so there were too many of them to sit at the kitchen table and they had to eat in the dining room, with its heavy velvet chairs. Maybe because of the atmosphere, the talk was slow and painful, with each topic squeezed dry before anyone was willing to let it go. Near the end of the meal, David started saying he should take Carolee home, it was getting late, and suddenly his dad stood up, pulled his keys from his pocket, and tossed them to David, saying, "Take my car if you want—it's roomier." Carolee had a total blank in her mind about what happened next, how the goodbyes went, which car they took, any of it. What his dad said, though: that she remembered. Maybe that was why she'd broken up with David—not the wealth itself but the way his dad more or less offered her up

to him, like she was some random trinket he'd acquired somewhere, a little more of the plenty he used to prove what a good father he was.

Carolee looked up at Alejandro. She said, "Of course you hate him—he's a dick."

Alejandro stared at her without speaking.

"What?"

He pulled up the neck of his T-shirt and wiped his eyes. "Did you just call my pops a dick?"

"He isn't one?"

"Say it again."

"Dick."

"Say 'Your dad is a dick.'"

From the end of the hallway came the sound of water running and the lid of a hinged wastepaper basket swinging up. Alejandro grabbed his phone; Carolee jumped to her feet and moved away from the desk.

His dad appeared, heading past the reception area toward his office. "What are you doing?" he said to Alejandro over his shoulder. "You can't sit there."

She had an infection—but she already knew that. She had an infection but she was in luck because he had an antibiotic in his office, and he gave her six tablets in a blister pack, to be taken twice a day for three days. "Don't stop just because you feel better," he said gruffly, and she thought, I know, I'm not stupid, and then felt a tremendous pity for Alejandro, to be this man's son.

They retraced their steps, down the pebbled stairway, through the lobby, out to the car.

Dr. Mitchell said, "Where do you live?"

Alejandro waved him off. "I can take her."

"Where," Dr. Mitchell repeated, "do you live?"

He drove out to the freeway, past David Connell's street, through a neighborhood of large old houses where she'd been to parties when she was younger—children's birthday parties with petting zoos brought in for entertainment, sweet-sixteen parties with special themes: Carnaval! Hollywood in the thirties! She always had her mom drop her off a block away, so no one would see their car.

In the Mercedes they sped south, the heater blowing, none of them saying a word. Her exit came up, and she directed Dr. Mitchell to her apartment. He didn't even turn around when she said thank you. "See you at work," she told Alejandro.

She was on the sidewalk when Dr. Mitchell powered down the passenger window. He leaned across and spoke to her. "Excuse my son. He should be seeing you in."

Fury rose up in her, and she said, "Actually, he's being polite. He's being a gentleman, pretending we aren't fucking. Come on, babe, you're coming in with me, aren't you?"

Dr. Mitchell's eyes widened ever so slightly.

Alejandro got out of the car, grinned uncertainly, shut the door behind him. He came and stood in front of her. "Are we making out?" he whispered.

She rolled her eyes at him and then took each of his forearms and pulled them around her. At the curb the Mercedes idled, and she pulled Alejandro closer and waited, willing the car to leave. She wanted to keep hating him—Dr. Mitchell—but it was fading fast, and she found herself thinking that they all, all three of them, knew one thing: that wanting to be gone was one thing, but going was another.

They Sell Christmas Trees

Christopher Cheney

By the condemned mall they sell Christmas trees and where they clean their hands in puddles of thawed snow and while they beat their gloves in customers' headlights and when they run their hands through branches and how when they wash dishes they break the handles off tea cups and how their daughters sleep naked with football jerseys and how the electricity goes off and comes back on and when they found a seeing eye dog by their trash cans and when they first decided to get married and how it was drizzling and how they lean trees against a plywood shed and how their friends lift road kill over a median and how the smell drags into the forest and stays on their clothes.

They Forgot Them There

They took drinks into another room and they forgot them there and they took flowers from someone else's kitchen and they held them together with bandanas and their mothers were having coughing fits and they parted their curtains and they offered them a place to sit and they sat with them and they said things like there's no such thing as an unlit room and they digressed into a shouting match and they affectionately tossed their jackets and they were shown a place where they could sleep and they stood and stood there.

South Haven

John O'Connor

IT WAS THE SUMMERTIME AND WE WERE WITH OUR FAMILIES OUT at Sleepy Hollow, an old resort just north of South Haven, Michigan, right on the big lake. I was twelve. She was a year or two older and came from a town called Anderson, near Indianapolis. Her family had once been farm people but she seemed cast from far more exotic stock. Her name was Angelique, for instance, an uncommon name in central Indiana and not, in her case, a family name but an affectation of her parents, who were artists and lapsed hippies. She wore leather cowboy boots in the heat of summer and let her hair spill onto her face and across her shoulders to her chest, where it clotted among a few beaded necklaces. She'd go down to the water with it untied and snapping in the wind, and in one staggeringly erotic flourish her fingers would dart up to brush it from her neckline and tuck it into her T-shirt collar. She was even known to drink coffee.

Although I'd never been to Anderson, I imagined it a squalid hick town full of BMX hooligans and budding rapists, a place where most girls have been pregnant before high school and boys in acid-wash hide brass knuckles in their boots. There was a bruised quality to Angelique that suggested this, something unwieldy and breakable, as if she'd been pushed into life too early and didn't know what to make of it. I knew Anderson was tornado country, so I imagined Angelique to be more vulnerable than she was, having presumably spent a lot of

time huddled in storm cellars and roadside ditches and so on. Of course Anderson was likely no different from my hometown of Kalamazoo, which was an hour east of South Haven on dry flatland surrounded by celery farms; not exactly a high-orbit of refinement. But back then it seemed remarkable that Angelique lived in Anderson and managed to escape unscathed.

To me, she belonged to that breed of beachvolk I grew up around during the summers on Lake Michigan: athletic, prodigiously tanned people who wore nothing but sandals and swimwear and considered lake water their salvation. She was a starlet of this set, flawless in a nylon one-piece Speedo, exploding with a soft, meticulous beauty that was vaguely pornographic. After a swim she'd slip into a pair of cotton gym shorts and the wetness would draw a relief of her backside that tripped a subterranean chord in me. You cannot imagine how good she looked lying next to me in the sand. The roundness of her bottom, the white of her inner thighs, smacked me with loony desire I'd never felt before. That she was a farm girl, more or less, with dirty fingernails and a passion for aerial fireworks, only made it worse.

I don't recall much of what we said to each other. With few exceptions, all seemed to pass silently between us, though that's probably just my memory switching off. Other details have blurred away, such as why she agreed to the thing in the first place. Although she didn't need to, she offered us a defense of sorts, I suppose so she wouldn't appear too sluttish. But this was twenty-five years ago and I've forgotten her reasoning. I remember vividly, however, what it was like to lose my fear of sex and enter a world of panting, zoo-animal lust. I recall the early feelings of dread, my tangled nerves, and the sense of bewilderment at what we were doing and the worry that it was somehow illegal or dangerous or both.

My family vacationed at Sleepy Hollow every summer until I was fourteen. It was a big wide-open place with lots of grass and sand and a rim of white cottages around a giant pool. A restaurant called Ichabod's was the lone expansion on the Washington Irving theme. The roads were unpaved. Sand swept down from high rolling dunes

and spilled into the black water. On a clear day you looked for Chicago.

It was the kind of place people returned to year after year, though there were interlopers like Angelique's family who came just once or twice. She told me it was either there or a beach near Gary, where her father had a fishing place neither she nor her mother liked much, on account of their relatives, who from the sound of it had a spiritual acquaintance with booze. South Haven was her father's big concession, though once he saw it he didn't complain. They rented one of the pricier units by the beach, surrounded by great elms and maples. Ours was a breezy two-bedroom deal thrown back in the pines, lacking telephone and coffeemaker but deliciously cool at night.

My own parents were struggling. When I was older I saw that my dad had been withdrawing from us back then, had begun to separate himself in little ways, something I'm sure he loathed but considered necessary. I never felt that he didn't love us, only that there was a detachment. Although the downfall was a ways off, and there remained some affection between my parents, I sensed our days at Sleepy Hollow were coming to an end.

My best friend there was Hayes. We were the same age but he seemed older, with the quiet, affable poise of a British golfer. His parents were divorced and pawned him off on his grandparents every summer, and as a result he had a bit of a wild streak. He suckered me into rock fights on the beach that ended terribly, with blood gushing from our heads. But grown-ups loved Hayes because of his abandonment, so he was permitted an occasional outburst.

It was Hayes who approached Angelique at the pool one day. She was lying on a patio chair, wrapped in a towel at the waist and dripping with Coppertone, black Wayfarer sunglasses hoisting a pile of hair from her forehead. We'd seen her around, found out she was from Anderson, and plotted our approach. Hayes, who came from a remote Chicago suburb, said that small-town Indiana girls were notoriously loose and that Angelique, with her long neck and pouting lips, looked like love.

That day Hayes was a resident-pro in seduction, a man of raw courage and resolve, his voice a steady lustrous thing that made you

believe. Which was fortunate, because the mere mention of her name —elegant and foreign-sounding—struck me mute with fear. It was like I'd never even imagined a girl before Angelique, and I could never have approached her alone. Hayes's cunning was extraordinary. Words came out of him fixed and shining, burnished by his strange adolescent confidence. Somehow he arranged for the three of us to meet on the beach stairs the following night.

Hayes and I had amassed a caché of porno magazines, which we stored in a small covered hole at the edge of a ravine that ran behind some cottages. We'd gather there secretly, huddled over the pale, soiled flesh, our sweat dripping onto the pages, ferns brushing our calves. My penis would rise in my shorts like a tiny bone and suddenly it would seem like I was standing on uneven ground. My sexuality was tentative then. I played with myself in private but rarely ejaculated, leery of the slick, incriminating mess of semen. It was foreboding, this whole darkened thing with women and insertion. I had hoped the porn would clarify things, provide a segue to real flesh-and-blood girlhood of the sort embodied by Angelique. But it only left me more puzzled and angst-ridden, unable to fathom how to go from half-jerking-off under the covers to wholesale vaginal berserking.

We'd stolen the magazines from a wayward lifeguard who drove a black T-top Firebird Trans Am, recently rebuilt. His name was Wyatt (I was apparently the only one in southwest Michigan with a boring name). He had a stingray haircut with the part down the middle. His smoky room near the tennis courts was a library of pornography: *Hustler, Penthouse*, *Playboy*, even *Juggs*. Hayes and I would browse the periodicals while Wyatt sat drinking Apple Schnapps and smoking Winstons and talking of loose women. He let us drive his Firebird once, with him riding shotgun and Hayes and I taking turns down a dirt road hemmed on one side by a cliff overlooking the beach. We came down hard on the curves, spitting out the window and listening for the sound of gravel zinging off the guardrail. Wyatt never allowed us drink or cigarettes, but he encouraged us with women, and with Angelique in particular. He'd noticed her himself, he said.

When Hayes told him about our impending rendezvous on the beach stairs, Wyatt didn't miss a beat.

"She seems like a modern lady," he announced. "Maybe she'll have you both."

Hayes's eyes locked onto mine. Across the ten feet of floor between us, he whispered, "We can share."

This hadn't occurred to me, but it made sense. I would've been lost without Hayes. Worse. I'd become epileptically unhinged, the sun-dappled neckline and deviant sexual appetites of Angelique from Anderson leaving me convulsed on the beach stairs' splintering, shadowy top landing. That kind of humiliation would follow me through life. I needed Hayes's counsel, his steadying hand. In a way it wouldn't be so different from the magazines, I told myself. Keep my head down, mouth ajar, and try to remain upright.

This was the summer my parents first appeared to me as sex people. It didn't happen overnight—I didn't walk in on them or anything—but I started to sense that they existed in a realm apart from me, a solemn place that adults never talked about or did so obliquely with a kind of smirk, as if only they knew how the world operated. For the first time I saw something more in my parents' affection for each other. When they touched, I looked away.

I didn't realize the connection to Angelique, to the peculiar roil of terror and anticipation she let loose in me that for so long afterward hung on the edge of my desire, never completely vanishing. It also had to do with the summertime in South Haven, I think, with the endless parade of flesh that spoke of all kinds of weird possibilities. We were beach-savants. Our world was of the half-naked and sun-prone. My mom resided in one of those low-slung canvas beach chairs, her rear-end brushing the sand, a hardcover novel in her lap. I remember thinking for the first time she was beautiful and that men would die broken-hearted from never having had her, though I couldn't have explained exactly what that meant.

My dad, too, seemed to vibrate with sex. Shirtlessness was for him the zenith of relaxation. He would've gone all summer without a shirt if he could have. At night he'd sit bare-chested on the porch with his

cigarettes and Coors and bask in the pure leisure of summer. He was beautiful in his own way, tan and fit with a constellation of freckles on him and a head of blond hair that was trying for dear life to hold on. It was strange and cringing to see my folks like this, but I also felt like I was being let in on a great secret. By the time Angelique came along, part of me seemed to be gathering momentum, moving faintly off, while another part hung back, resisting the life-scrambling changes coming on.

That next night, Angelique was waiting for us on the beach stairs. She wore a blue flowered dress and denim jacket. It was windy out and we had to shout to hear one another.

As Wyatt had predicted, she was a modern lady. I forget exactly how it was decided, but the three of us came to an understanding. Hayes went first. And as he and Angelique kissed and groped each other, a sound like gulped milk coming from their mouths, I became submerged by a sudden dread. It wasn't that I didn't want her. I did. But livid, *Juggs*-like scenes sprang into my head, images of women twisted and pinned in something like agony, which didn't seem to translate to this. When it was my turn, I spun to go. But Hayes rounded on me and before I knew it he'd slipped me into a vice-like full nelson. With Hayes ahold of me, Angelique dragged me toward her. She had a dazzled look in her eyes. Her mouth opened in a whimper. At the point of impact I felt like I'd been stabbed in the chest. There followed a sensation like drowning, and I gasped for air as she attempted to strangle me with her tongue.

It was only a kiss, not even my first, but when it was over I had a feeling of having been infected. After we said goodnight, I dashed to a drinking fountain to rinse out my mouth. I was barefoot in a field next to the swimming pool, which was encircled by a fence made out of old television screens, stacked four or five across and fastened at the ends by wood beams. At night the underwater lights made the screens glow like an aquarium, and I had to shield my eyes from it as I sloshed water around in my mouth and spewed it onto the ground.

Out of the darkness came a group of older kids returning from a party on the beach. They were giddy from alcohol. I knew some of them, including a boy of sixteen who stayed in the cottage next to

mine. I'd seen him downtown one day smoking with local kids outside a grocery store. He now swayed over to me and drew me aside. "I saw you," he murmured, his moist lips brushing my ear, a skinny scab-encrusted arm thrown over my shoulders. It turned out that our spot on the stairs—illuminated by Christmas lights strung along the banister—had afforded orchestra viewing for anyone on the beach who happened to glance up. "The three of you. A nice deal."

He had a bottle of something in his hand and took a pull of it. "How was it?"

"Fine," I said. He shoved the bottle at me. As I drank from it the liquid caught in my throat, lodging there like hot ash before raking its way down to my stomach.

"Fine?" he asked.

"Great."

He seemed to consider this. "You know what comes next, right?"

I stared. "Two words," he said, holding his fingers apart, wagging one and then the other. "Cubby." He paused. "Hole."

He grinned at his witticism. I felt the weight of his arm on me, wooziness from the booze. I wanted to recoil, to race home and go to sleep. "I've never been drunk before," I offered, hoping to change the subject. His shoulders heaved up and settled down again as he regarded me. His eyes, flushed and blank, seemed to bob in their sockets. Finally he rapped my shoulder with his knuckles, drew himself up, and released me, snapping my earlobe as he slid away. "Keep up the good work, hero. I promise you'll like it."

This little motivational had an effect on me. Walking home under a black vault of Michigan sky, alcohol buzzing in the pit of my stomach, I thought I saw his meaning. It occurred to me that the thing with Angelique *had* been pleasant in a way. It was a newfound domain, heart-attack territory for sure, but perhaps also a good thing. The thrill of it suddenly pierced and ran through me, and I decided I could give myself over to whatever might come next.

For the rest of the week, the three of us met for daily trysts. We'd clamber over the dunes and lie hidden in the beach grass. We'd meet at the foot of the old water tower in the woods, among the dirt and planks and rusted metal. ĩ was no longer cold about it, but I was glad

for the complicity of our arrangement, happy to be sharing Angelique with Hayes. He and I were conscientious, taking care not to linger too long in our turns, letting Angelique know that neither of us would prevail over the other in this. She seemed to understand and gave no more or no less to either Hayes or I.

Wyatt was beside himself when we broke the news. "What did I tell you?" he hollered, crawling up on a flimsy chair and pointing down at us like a preacher whose flock has witnessed the Risen Lord. "Did I *not* tell you?"

Things progressed. Her shirt started coming open. My hand went down inside her underwear and my penis jabbed at her through my shorts. Sometimes I'd watch my reflection in her Wayfarers. I wanted to see this, to see myself as she might be seeing me, and Hayes, too, looking on from a few yards away. I thought the three of us were edging towards something new, maybe even the Act itself.

And then Hayes began to drop away. He got bored or distracted and soon shucked himself of us altogether. I didn't understand it at first and was reluctant to continue without him. I wanted him there if even just in a supervisory role. But once I had Angelique alone I knew that was how it was supposed to be. We took walks on the beach at night, then dropped in the sand and attacked one another. I clawed at her and sucked her skin. She returned this, her dusky, polished eyes staring back at me, her thin fingers clutching my penis. We skirmished around sex, toying with the idea of it, but it remained elusive.

Looking back, she seems too good to be true. A bright young girl out of the Indiana scrubland with a knowing smile and a hairstyle way before its time, cast friendless into the Michigan summer. I was just twelve but I was completely transfixed. This person, a stranger, had become a part of me, had given me my first inkling of love. I knew it was crazy luck, but it also wracked me with anxiety. Every day before we met, a daunting, erotic thing came alive in me like a budding cactus and seemed to spoon out my insides. It vanished the instant we touched, but still, I hadn't expected the gut-punch of it.

Hayes and I saw each other the same as before. We sailed through the porn at Wyatt's and met down by the ravine. Nothing much changed. Except that toward the end of his stay he started talking a

lot about returning to his parents in Illinois. He'd chatter away about it, getting real animated, and start knocking Sleepy Hollow as just another hick outpost like Anderson, filled with dirt and weeds and fat old men. Chicken County, he called it. Then, losing some of his poise, he'd make these clucking noises and waddle around in a circle. We fought at the pool one afternoon, pulled apart by a lifeguard. Hayes's eyes glittered and burned with malice. A moment later he wept awfully.

When it was time for Angelique to return to Anderson, Hayes joined us again, the three of us reverting to our old ways. I don't remember much about the last night. I guess I'd expected some kind of finale with Angelique, but it was just more of our slobbering and fiddling and standing up shaking the sand from our shorts. I'm not sure why Hayes decided to come back. He didn't seem to enjoy it. I found myself thinking a couple of times that I'd rather have had it end sooner than like this. Angelique looked incredible, with a cotton hat pulled down over her ears. But I felt terrible, and when it was over I walked down the steps to the beach and sat in the sand with hot tears pouring down my face.

The following year Angelique didn't show. I learned at the front desk that her family hadn't booked a cottage. Returned to the inebriate shores of Gary, I assumed. I think Hayes had forgotten about her. I hadn't, and in my memory she was far more delicate than she'd ever been in person. It took some effort to free my mind of her. I didn't think I'd see her again.

Then the next year she was back. I ran into her at the snack bar and with horror discovered that she was no longer beautiful. She'd become plump and acned. An unlit cigarette hung from the corner of her mouth. Her blouse was tight, her hair chopped like a boy's. She'd finally succumbed to the ravages of small-town life, I thought. Even worse, she had a friend with her who was much prettier. I was wounded and probably didn't hide it very well.

Hayes was gone. One of his parents had moved away and taken him with. I never saw him again. Wyatt, too, was missing. The management had gotten wind of his having local women in his room and

hadn't hired him back. So it was just me and Angelique and her pretty friend.

"Hayes isn't here," I offered.

"That's too bad," Angelique said, cigarette held aside in grubby fingers. She wouldn't meet my eyes, staring instead at the floor around our feet. Her friend stood watching us.

"I think he isn't coming back."

"Where'd he go?" Her voice sounded raspy and far-off, like she was speaking through a door.

"To Wisconsin." I didn't have any idea where Hayes had gone but my heart was pounding and this just popped out. Lunchers streamed past us to Ichabod's restaurant, briefly crowding the corridor. It was stuffy and loud and I wanted out of there. Angelique replaced the cigarette, swiveled it around in her mouth and pretended to pat for a lighter. I took a peak at her friend: smooth yellow arms, soft breasts, trim calves, and large pale eyes that held a raw, smirking curiosity in them. The contrast to Angelique couldn't have been crueler.

What else I remember is Angelique never lighting her cigarette but gnawing constantly at a piece of her lip, the chime of the microwave behind the counter and the sweet chalky odor of coffee and Danishes, a listless August breeze blowing outside, and my mind drifting off somewhere until it came back and decided enough was enough.

"I should go," I said flatly. Angelique looked up and gave me a gloomy smile.

"Do you want to meet later?" she asked with a tight-lipped urgency that was not at all appealing. "If it's not cold tonight we might go to the beach." Her friend nodded.

I must've hesitated, because Angelique folded her arms over her chest and breathed a long throaty sigh. "It's just an idea," she said.

"Yes, okay," I replied. And then I was gone.

My dad had trucked me out to Sleepy Hollow for a week of father-son convalescence. He and my mom were separated and I knew it'd be our last summer there. I should've been grateful. He had given me this, after all, a quiet place of sun and grass, a world to myself . . . Angelique. But instead I was angry. I said little all week. We fished one morning off the pier downtown, catching nothing. My dad sat on a

bucket gazing out at our bobbers. He seemed older and calmer than I'd ever seen him. It had long been our understanding that all species of fish were united in conspiracy against us, and we'd curse the salmon and perch and bass of spectacular girth we knew resided out there, mocking us, getting fat off our bait. But that morning we were quiet. Occasionally he'd glance over at me, the light shining off the water onto the thinning patch of hair on his scalp. I was too young to understand it then but he was grieving too. He was living alone in a condo on the edge of Kalamazoo. When the school year started, I would join him, leaving my mother and sisters in the house we'd grown up in. Things were never the same.

I avoided Angelique and her friend all week. Then one night around dusk they came by the cottage. I was sitting on the porch with my dad when Angelique's friend called out from the road to see if I wanted to go for a walk. My dad smiled and swatted my arm. He heard in her voice the same thing I did. "Have us," she seemed to be saying. I felt a twitch in my loins. A debauched evening lay ahead, if I chose—a fortuitous reversal of our previous arrangement. Angelique still had some of her old charm. And her friend was ravishing.

All of this ran through my head, but I didn't want to go anywhere. It wasn't because of her changed looks or that hard flood of anxiety I'd felt before. I can't say what it was. I just preferred to sit on that porch in the quiet with my dad. But I couldn't very well say that, and didn't know what else to say.

Finally, I shouted "No thanks." My dad gave a murmur and got up and went inside. Angelique said nothing, then waved shyly at me and headed off. I remember the dejected look she wore as she walked away, her sweater hanging off of shoulders that had a little extra fat on them. It took an intolerably long time for them to vanish around the bend. As they did, the friend turned and shot me a cruel glance. I think they left the next day, because that was the last I saw of Angelique from Anderson.

I got a letter from her once but don't recall what it said or what became of it. I meant to respond. Mostly I wanted to ask whether she'd ever repeated our experiment with anyone else. Also, would she have picked

Hayes over me had she the choice? And did she ever feel in some way that she couldn't refuse us? But I couldn't quite find the words.

My dad has a place again in South Haven, bought not long after he and my mom divorced. He has recovered from two more failed marriages in this house, which sits on a bluff with a steel retaining wall to keep the yard from slipping into the lake. Although it's fairly new, it has an air of having been there for a long time.

Sleepy Hollow is just south. It's a nice drive to my dad's from that direction, along clean back roads and a crumbling slice of Blue Star Highway, the lake stretching away to the right, soybean and blueberry farms to the left and prosperous little summer homes with the most elaborate, abundant shrubbery. We are talking, say, six or seven miles without a speed-trap or collarless animal, just a solitary black column laid out under sagging power lines, lumping here and there over sewer furrows, holding the woods at bay. It's along this route that Hayes and I drove Wyatt's Firebird one afternoon, screaming into the corners, aiming for a pinpoint where the blacktop swept from sight. When we came back my hands were trembling. I stood in the trees next to the tennis courts where Wyatt parked the Firebird, a strange floating delirium creeping up on me, a sense of things lying suddenly at a remove, mirrored and intangible, as if I was on the outside of them looking in.

Practice

Karan Mahajan

SHE HAD MADE IT A PRACTICE TO WONDER WHEN AND HOW HER husband would die. She did this not out of malice or suppressed rage or boredom, but rather because she was in remarkably better shape than him, had been ever since they had married four decades ago, and was aware that, if things continued this way—if he continued to cultivate a paunch and smoke and eat fried food—she would face a significant slice of her life alone: all her absurd fitness would be for naught. There'd be no one around to appreciate her sexagenarian glow, to keep her cutting through ribbon after ribbon of chlorinated water in the local swimming pool or smashing volleys with her swank blue tennis racquet stretched wide in its smile of guts. For years she'd quite enjoyed the mismatch in their habits and all the possibilities it presented for domestic coaxing and chiding, but now they were entering a new phase of their life: it was the day of Vinod's retirement. She herself had stopped working years before—she was laid off rather mechanically by the local pension fund during a budget crisis, and was so ashamed thereafter that she never attempted to find another job. When people asked why she had quit (she'd encouraged this misconception) she explained she wished to bring up her children; after they were brought up, she claimed she and Vinod didn't need two incomes, which was true, and also a veiled boast. She occu-

pied herself with exercise and volunteer work and wondering when Vinod, her only love, would die.

His father had been leveled by cardiac arrest, so had a dozen of his cousins. She could picture his heart hibernating in its aqueous nest of blood and gore.

She waited at the dinner table, shuffling a pack of business cards handed to her by a variety of yoga instructors that she had located by driving around in her sedan a few hours after Vinod had left for work. All his life he had used work to excuse his home-time indolence—bloating about on two overlong legs, one hand wrapped in a packet of chips swiped from the office kitchen—but now she planned to confront him at once with all her apocalyptic visions: gallstones, pancreatitis, malfunctioning kidneys, corrosive diabetes (which he had already and could be measured out in Splenda spoons), failed liver (he drank two whiskeys a day), heart damage, the gout (it still happens), paralyzing strokes, lung cancer, and plain old obesity (he was vain, you could see it in the perfect part of his hair); and in this way frighten him into living for her the way he had lived for his work.

But he had as many excuses as she had putative diseases: retirement hadn't relaxed him. He came in from his last day at the office looking as if the CEO had dinged him with a couple of all-night assignments as a goodbye gift. He sat down across from her at the table and then got up to turn on another light and succeeded instead in plunging the apartment in darkness. Through this constant fidgeting, Ritu kept speaking. He was now across from her, formally, at the table, glasses halfway down his nose as he peered at the cards she passed one by one for his inspection. His tan suit seemed to be shrinking around the breathing balloon of his body. As his body had gotten rounder, morbidly jolly, his face had acquired a gauntness to match Ritu's over-exercised, tight expressions. He put his glasses on the table and grimaced. "Darling, I need to tell you something."

"Will you let me finish?" she said.

But she *was* finished. "Okay—what is it?" she asked.

"It's bad," he said. "You'll be upset."

"Tell me and get it over with."

She had always wondered how he'd supported three children and one wife with a job at a company that made wiring for houses.

Her next thought was: he'll die if he has to go to jail.

He turned over a business card and inscribed a few small words with a pen plucked from the pocket of his favorite shirt—a shirt he hadn't worn for an entire year because he'd reserved its pastel-services for his last day.

"Promise you won't be mad?" he asked. "I wanted to write you a letter. But I'm not used to writing or typing anymore. I dictate everything to Susan—" Susan was his secretary, was he having an affair? "And I didn't think I could dictate this."

He passed Ritu the card; she turned it over. It said: *I think I may be gay.*

It was such a ridiculous statement that Ritu began to cackle. "So you're not going to play tennis because you're *gay*, is it?" she asked.

He looked at her with sympathy—like she was an angry client in need of placation.

"Don't joke with me," she said. "I've spent all morning thinking about you and your bloody health." But his expression didn't change. His face was still puckered in a lawyerly fashion. Ritu's heart, which had been doing a bit of hibernating itself, began racing. She felt a twinge of pain down her sciatica. The pain dated back to the time she had tried to spice up their inert sex life with whips and ropes, thinking that this is what an American couple would do if faced with a similar situation: she was a big reader of women's magazines, thought them a necessary part of her integration into the country.

She was furious that he could make her feel so unwell. "To you, tying me up was a game," she said, getting up from her chair with some effort and pacing the living room with a hand on the topmost knob of her spine. "But for me—my health is ruined. I can barely walk some days in the winter without feeling shooting pains. The doctor said I have to do therapy if I want it to get better. I hate doing therapy. But if I don't then I'll never feel my right leg. It feels like someone has injected me with cold liquid steel. And for what. For nothing. For this."

She was exaggerating. They had only engaged in this dubious activity two times.

When he tried to point this out, she said, "Stop. Don't you dare speak another word."

When he said that he still loved her, that nothing would change, she screamed, "I'm not interested in a goddamn retirement speech!"

For two hours, she left him. She went to the grocery store and walked up and down the aisles and didn't drop anything into her swinging green plastic basket. The back pain vanished; she needed to tell someone something. But at the porch of her neighbor Helga's house—the site she always stormed to in the aftermath of a passionate fight—she found herself undone by the simple prospect of ringing the doorbell. It was July and it was as if she had swum through a vat of sweat. The muggy stillness of the evening was still shot through with the after-slam of her front door, and towering above her were the oak trees that occupied so much of Helga's attention: in August she would sit outside in a deck chair on her porch and stare down these swaying monsters, waiting for one of them to fall facedown on her property so she could then engage in the single most intimate act in her life: meeting a neighbor in court. Helga had sued Vinod and Ritu four times and now they were friends. Ritu pitied her loneliness—her sagging face with the smoke-yellowed teeth—the way she pitied her future Vinod-less self. The thought that the future was now, and that she had lost Vinod to a malady far worse than death made her turn on her heels and dash back home.

Vinod was on their front lawn, pacing up and down, head low as if he had accidentally dropped a cigarette—a common occurrence. He was such a smiley, nice, passive fellow that he could even make smoking look awkward—the glamorous, exact part in his hair was his attempt to defeat awkwardness with careful preparation. He was vain with his face because the rest of his body was falling apart. Ritu walked right up to him, her eyes clogged and red, both hands in deep fists at her side, and spoke through her teeth, "Why did you tell me *today*?"

Two lampposts sprinkled light like reluctant showerheads. In the humid air everything was smeary and simultaneous. Vinod sat himself down on the front step of the house and put a new cigarette in his mouth, adding to the gray confusion of sweat on his face. "To be honest? Because I don't have a career anymore that you can ruin."

"You think *I* would have ruined you," Ritu said. "I seem like *that* type to you."

"No—but it may have gotten out. And the children would have been so ashamed. I didn't want them to have to suffer. I've known for thirty years. I've never acted on it."

"So now the timing is right. You want me to ruin you *now* is it?"

"That's not it," he said.

Again that involuntary smile.

"You want a divorce?" Ritu asked. "You want to leave me for a man?"

He stuck his two index fingers through the laces on his shoe.

Ritu continued, "Because I have no plans of divorcing you—"

"Me neither," he said. "I love you. I told you about this because I love you. I love you more than I love our children."

She ignored this, and instead leaned over him threateningly. "My reasons for not wanting a divorce are straightforward," Ritu said. "One. I'm not going to let you be a faggot. Two, you married me and you're going to stay with me. Three—"

She couldn't list a third reason.

Then they were silent for a second and the very fact of silence between them was such a terrifying premonition of life *without* each other that they instinctively fell upon each other, arms and hips and thighs locking in ways that were once sexual and now only muscled evocations of terror. From the corner of his eye as he rose he detected the visual beeping of the dying red cigarette butt cast out in the wet grass. She pressed her head against his broad shoulders so hard it hurt. The sound of the hinge creaking was long and otherworldly but who noticed. She held on to him tight and sobbed in his ear. After some time he made out what she was saying.

She was saying: If we'd stayed in India.

"Darling," Vinod said finally. "It's your old habit. To regret everything."

"Now I have a good reason," she said.

In this way they were dramatic together.

Things changed—of course. She began to loop through the eye of this tiny awful confession the entire thread of her life until every memory was knotted up in shame. Shame on him for telling her so late that even the remedy of adultery was unavailable to her: who would make love to her now? She was sixty-three and white-haired and in her last decade of sex. All her caring toward him, the maternal and almost superhuman warmth she felt on the occasions of his sexual failure, her soothing him and gathering him up from that embarrassed smile on that long downy bed that overpowered the room like a cruise-liner lodged in a pond, seemed utterly wasted. Of romance nothing could be said. The men who had passed through their life—colleagues, neighbors, friends, cousins, quacks, pundits—were highlighted now in her reminisces with double the attention: she wondered if her crushes over the years were his crushes as well, and she was inwardly sick.

She gave up her routine of aerobics, volunteer work, tennis, Canasta, and swimming, and racked up uncharacteristic fines from the local library for books on psychology that she couldn't even crack open to the contents page. She made excuses to her white friends and didn't bother calling back the Indian ones. The days seemed to pass now in a survivalistic pattern of cooking and sleeping, and even this she was doing less and less of as Vinod took over the pots and pans. He had moved into their youngest son's abandoned bedroom and was reading all the books she'd borrowed. Finally, Ritu, needing respite, bored to tears, began calling her three children more and more. At the other end she encountered voicemail—deep practiced voices enunciating the twangy New England accent that Vinod and Ritu, for all their assimilation, had never acquired; they were lower-class and aspirational by birth, and had chosen instead to imitate their richer Indian counterparts, slowing and turning the vowels in their mouths till they sounded Oxfordian and regal. The Americans

loved this regality, which was a valid consideration for Ritu and Vinod. It was their country, the Americans, and you had to entertain them, with jokes even.

When the children called Ritu back, it was always a disappointment.

They were overwhelmed by their own lives. Answers were curt and the updates were generic: the babies are good, work is good, health is great. It has been said that the human ear can actually hear a smile across a phone; with the children, Ritu could conjure vivid soundscapes: the creaking pressure of the phone jacked between the ear and shoulder, the hands of whoever (Rohit or Bharat or Anita) performing a task of such importance—cooking, diapering, typing—that it made up for the time wasted even as it was being wasted. But maybe you couldn't blame them. None of them had married practically.

This had confirmed hers and Vinod's greatest fears. Early on, with their few handpicked anglicized Indian friends they had shared the conviction that they wanted everything for their children—except BMWs.

"Because BMWs are made by Nazis?" the friends asked. "Is that why?"

"No, no, forget the Nazis," said Vinod.

"Exactly," said Ritu. "After all Hindus use Swastikas also."

"B M W," Vinod said, emphasizing each letter. "Black Muslim or White."

Well, the children had obeyed. They'd married a Jew, a Chinese, and a Latino.

Now Ritu, wanting to blame her husband's homosexuality for all her problems, became more forceful with her introspection. Why this fate for all the children? Why had all of them been so readily swallowed by other cultures? Their daughter, Anita, forever analyzing, wisp-shouldered and hotheaded, was happy to oblige with a fully formed theory on the phone. "Basically we're white—our family," she quipped. "We never had any interest in Indian culture. You grew up in India and *you* never had any interest in Indian culture. So we turned out like the Wasps but without the Wasp traditions. We mar-

ried exotically. We're deracinated. We didn't think like Indians and we didn't marry like Indians."

Ritu's hand was under the sobbing downcast eye of the kitchen tap. Two long green shoots of celery—the length of toothbrush handles—were piping water through the long cupolas of their bodies: she held them over the sink in graceful, domestic repose and spoke into a headset. "That's an interesting theory," she said.

"There's nothing you could have done," Anita said. "It's just what happens. We're an unusual family. Oh—John says hi."

"Tell him I say hi," Ritu said.

"What are you making?" Anita asked.

"Indian food," Ritu lied.

Ritu stood in the kitchen afterward, summoning her first impressions of the young quiet Chinese boy her daughter had picked for a husband—she hoarded first impressions; it was the world's currency; you could get used to oddity but the world still snapped you with its Polaroid judgment. John: He had a frizzy kinked mop and a habit of covering his mouth when he laughed. The first time she met him he was wearing a tie but the tie was too broad and its sister snake wasn't looped in properly and so kept dangling into view. He said he liked Indian food and worked at Goldman Sachs. His parents were where: In China? In Long Island? In Queens? No: divorced. He was Chinese; his wife was Indian; their children were a world population problem. She went straight to the living room where her husband sat cross-legged on a couch solving a puzzle of Sudoku and screamed at him.

"This is all your fault," she said. "If you hadn't wanted to be gay we'd have gone back and none of this would have happened."

"What's wrong with children marrying people of other races?" he asked.

He followed her into the kitchen, where she continued washing the celery—for no reason except to give her anger a domestic tint. "Nothing, except they have no interest in us. If they'd married Indians they would have been more traditional. They'd have asked us to live with them when we grew old. We wouldn't be here in this stupid

house alone. I wouldn't have to worry what would happen to me after you died."

"But you hated India too," said Vinod. "You never wanted to go back."

Ritu ignored this. "You thought you could reinvent yourself after retirement as a fag. Well done."

"Ritu," he shushed. "We both wanted to reinvent ourselves. And we did."

They'd been not only poor in India—they'd been unsophisticated. The rest of their family was still village bound in Punjab, sugarcane farmers who spat between sentences as a matter of pride. Here they were rich and almost-white and anonymous—they boasted regal roots to their friends, and they had traction with the powerful elites of the neighborhood: the sheriff, the council member, even the pastor, who was so smitten by them that he'd tried unsuccessfully to convert them for a decade.

Only the children happened to know the truth about their humble background.

Finally Vinod said, "Ritu, darling. We gave the children too much love. We were too good for them."

This thought had entered Ritu's head before. That their unconditional laissez-faire love had backfired. In its simplicity it bored the children. Everyone in this day and age needed to have elements of a crazed game; it didn't matter how you played as long as you kept changing the score. They should have scolded, threatened, beat up, slapped, abused the children. They should have met their attempts to marry non-Indians with promises of disownment. You needed to fill them up with revenge. Now, instead, like the bursts of water from the tap, they flowed downward. Their love—guileless, transparent, cold—flowed downward to their spouses and children.

"You've got it all wrong," Ritu said. "I gave *you* too much love."

That night, for the first time, she revisited their apparatus of whips—bringing it out of the long ski covers in the basement they'd been zipped into years before. Up in the room, she made him lay naked on his stomach and went at his body as his half-paunch bounced softly

on the mattress. It was understood what was happening and so he winced and bit the mattress but didn't—all said and done—scream.

In the morning they both looked and felt like death.

"We're growing old," Ritu said.

"Agreed," Vinod mumbled.

The next morning she reignited the project of fitness she'd planned for him before his confession. She bought him a racquet and swimming trunks and dragged him along to all her sporting excursions, and though once or twice he threw his arms out and stuck to the walls of the pool like some unhurried mollusk, she was soon finding it difficult to count on her fingers the number of laps he could do—backstroke, of course, the old man's stroke. But it was too frustrating to play tennis with him and so she assigned him an instructor ($80 an hour) to teach him how to throw the ball to the necessary height to serve his way out of an epidemic of double-faults.

When it got too hot, he complained incessantly, all evening, the way he'd complained about his work; she took pleasure in ignoring him.

Then, one day, on the tennis court, as she watched from behind sunglasses, he broke a volley, crouched down by the miniature green referee crane (it's seat permanently abdicated), and jabbed the blackened bandaged racquet handle into his chest. The erratic bouncing ball and the slowing of his pulse appeared to be in concert; the racquet he turned like a screw; Ritu ran over from the sidelines, instinctively ripping off her headband.

His heart had fluttered, but the doctor said it was nothing, just the groans of a body unused to the rhythms of good health.

He was making it through. He became calmer, more graceful, fitter, a champion among retirees. The more anxious she felt, the more he seemed to luxuriate into this full-blooded routine. In the mornings she'd wake up and he'd already be on the porch with the wings of a newspaper flapping before his face. Then winter came again and she got used to the idea of his being gay the way one gets used to the callousness of one's children or the seasonal rants of the mother-in-law. He was himself, but trying doubly hard: he cooked chicken curry

and cleaned the garage and wasn't as incompetent as before. The garden was mowed in brilliant striations of green and blue-green. He said he'd led the happiest life he could have under the circumstances. Eventually—when she began again to accept *his* circumstances as *hers*—she agreed as well. His admission after all was a pledge of dependence and trust.

They were on normal talking terms and snowed inside the house by a terrible winter, and she said, "Did you *never* really act on it?"

They were watching TV but not really.

"No," said Vinod. "I swear to God."

"You should have," Ritu ventured. "Maybe you should."

"It's too late for me," he said. "I'm too old."

Ritu was suddenly despondent. "It's too late for me also. You should have just told me earlier. That way we could have separated and I could actually have been with someone who loved me."

"I don't know why you keep saying that," Vinod said. "I loved you."

"Someone who actually desired me," Ritu continued.

He was quiet.

"How did you manage all these years?" she said.

He sank his chin into his chest. "I told myself I was interested in human faces. I would stare at men and women too. And for men I thought: this is how I wished I could look—and so I felt less guilty."

"But how did you manage?" she interrupted.

"The Internet," Vinod said.

Their intimacy was such—had always been such—that when she requested he show him exactly what he meant, it took only a few more minutes of coaxing before he, in fact, *did*. He booted with a triumphant beat his Macintosh computer. Before it he sat on a soft executive chair as she watched over his shoulder the most fantastic and grotesque images of man with man. She had always been a prude—whipping notwithstanding—and being aware of this, acted blasé, nodding her head and humming.

"Show me more," she commanded.

Images appeared with that peculiar abrupt blink that images load on the Internet.

The revelation made him chatty. "It's horrible. You can see. But what could I do? I used to go here sometimes in the morning before work. I used to wake up early and do this instead of exercising."

Vinod seemed almost proud.

"That's why you're now having heart problems," she smiled.

"Ha. I suppose," he said. Then, after a pause: "I did all this surfing in secret. But I can tell you one thing. I never acted on it. I never masturbated to these images. They just were there, a thing to see. I know it's deviant but what to do? I knew I couldn't act on it. So I didn't."

"And you weren't afraid of being found out?" said Ritu.

"I was," Vinod said. "God, I was so afraid."

She began to stroke his tense shoulders as he tapped the keyboard.

He turned around and said, "Actually once Anita saw me."

He'd always been like a child—why didn't he understand that not everything needed to be confessed? She now felt demoted in the scheme of her family; she had probably lived in the midst of their silent mockery for years. On the phone, Anita was unforgiving as usual. "I didn't even know you knew how to use a computer."

"Well," Ritu said, building on her lies. "I was trying to write you an e-mail since you never call me and I found this picture of—men having sex—with men. It was horrible. Do you think it was Rohit?"

"Rohit? No—probably Dad. It's not that big a surprise is it? I mean, we've all sort of known Dad is gay."

Afterwards she pledged never to talk to her daughter, the queen of cool, again, but the shame wouldn't dissipate: it was hers and hers alone. She imagined her children discussing her marriage clinically with their spouses: *She's so oblivious, she probably had no clue.* To distract herself, later, when Vinod was asleep, she went online, with great difficulty and a flutter of fingers on the keyboard, to Shaadi.com, a marriage portal for Indians. The interface was confusing but she soon saw that there were thousands of postings by lonely Indian widowers—men her age, in their sixties—and she began to see how her life would be if she left Vinod. She'd have to go on dates with awk-

ward men who put brilliantine in their hair and licked their fingers before they counted off bills and perhaps had lost a tooth or two to a betel-nut addiction. It'd be disgusting but at least she wouldn't be an object of ridicule for her children: why did her children have to be so callous? Why couldn't Anita have comforted her? She didn't want to leave Vinod, but she hated the idea of being pitied. She wanted her self-respect back. She wanted Vinod back. The next day, she left him.

She was surprised by how welcoming Anita and John were—how quickly, despite Anita's curt manner, they accepted her presence in the small Brooklyn apartment, and how little they quizzed her about why, after forty years, she felt the need to abandon the man she'd always referred to as her "outside heart." But everything happens for a reason: she could see now that without this trip she'd never have known how wrong she was about her children and their spouses. John, who was Chinese, was as nice as any Indian son-in-law would have been—nicer, maybe, since he seemed to overcompensate for the mere fact of his existence. "Stay for as long as you like," he said, over and over again, while his wife expressed her affection through aggressive hospitality.

"We fight less when you're here Mom," Anita confided.

If Vinod died, Ritu knew, they would take good care of her, and the thought, ominous and comforting at once, spiked her vision with tears. She began to suffer a full-blown depression. Waking up one morning with a table fan pointed at her face, she was unable to convince the muscle of her left arm to reach over and turn it off. She was pinned to her bed, on her back, a pillow stuffed under her legs as per a doctor's advice. She felt simultaneously dehydrated and on the verge of going to the bathroom but nothing in the room—its generic plastic blinds, the landscape photographs that would have been at peace on an orthodontist's wall, even the golden field of Anita's mini tennis trophies planted on the wooden dresser—nothing in the room possessed the visual or mnemonic power to orient her, to show her a way out. The question wasn't *where* she was, but *why* she was at all. Simple objects appeared to exist at the confluence of infinite chance: Why was a sari called a sari? Why was it wrapped one way and not tied

another? Why were jeans blue? Why did the racquet reach for a tossed-up ball and not vice-versa? Could the pool be hungry for humans? Why were the blades of the fan pushing air out rather than sucking it in? What if she was Chinese and didn't know it?

She didn't think about Vinod because she was living in a world where Vinod had ceased to exist: a world without logic. The goodness of her children, the vanquishing of her prejudices, had destroyed her. She couldn't move.

The psychiatrist, brought in on the tenth hour of her immobility, prescribed Zoloft; she flushed it down the toilet, ashamed: over the course of her life, Ritu had escaped many things—India, poverty, crassness, even work—but she had never escaped shame, the burning feeling that you may be caught in the crosshairs of someone else's truth. If anyone needed a psychiatrist, it was her husband.

It was almost a relief to hear that Vinod, two hundred miles away, had suffered a minor heart attack on the tennis court.

It gave her a reason to go back: she arrived in the heat of July with Anita and Rohit and Bharat following a series of connecting flights. They each spent a day with Vinod, patting his chest in a paternal manner as he lay solidly on the hospital bed. "I was practicing to beat you when you got back," he told Ritu once the kids had all left.

He had aged in the two months he'd been without her, and she felt, not without a certain measure of shameful pride, that she had killed him. His inheritance of cardiac arrest had caught up with him.

"But instead you've become a potato," Ritu said.

"Yam," Vinod corrected.

Then he fell asleep, sitting upright on the bed—what else to do?

"Are you at least going to be upset at your children?" she said, waking him up. "They hardly stayed a day. One tight slap will fix them."

"My slapping days are over," Vinod said drowsily. "You should know that. So are my whipping days."

"You're perverse," Ritu said.

"And fat," Vinod added.

"And gay," Ritu said.

They were like an awkward couple on a first date. In a year she had gone from picturing his death to picturing life without him: he was to have valve-replacement surgery in a few hours.

"I should have had sex with many men," he said suddenly. "I should have had sex with a man every day of my life. I should have had a man for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and dessert."

"You should have. That's why I left. Did you have any luck?"

"It was a mistake to have not come out earlier. Years ago, when you were first pregnant, I wanted to tell you. I wanted to leave you. I thought you'd learn to deal with it: you'd have five tough years, maybe six, but you'd find your feet. But being a divorced Indian woman is as hard as being a gay Indian man, and it wasn't right to force you into that role. Besides, I got used to performing. And then it was difficult to stop. You get addicted to it. It's like being on a TV show or on Broadway, day after day. It's like being Alan Alda on MASH. Now that I've stopped I feel I've lost my core," he said. With one hand he felt around for the vain part in his hair. "Maybe telling you was a mistake. Maybe I should have kept on performing."

She said, "So go back to it."

He said, "But you'll know."

"Or not," she said, "I can perform too. I'll pretend nothing happened. I'll pretend that we've just moved to the US and we're one of those young fresh-off-the-boat couples that doesn't know better. We're both innocent. We've just had an arranged marriage,"—they'd had an arranged marriage, fantastic to think about now— "We're at the start of our lives. Nothing has happened. We're together."

He put his hand in hers and then went in for his surgery. The next day he was dead.

Summer Vacation

Andrew Pryor

Most of your calls will go unreturned. The thought of being in social situations in the month of June after a cloudburst is best experienced. To avoid any potential embarrassment for your partner, always use a cell phone. You spend the morning reading about a kind of hernia that weakens the eyes; discover someone else's hair on your pillow. *A supple fir makes the best slingshot*. The author explains he finished the book because he could no longer live with the characters. The only way to kiss an Olympian surfer: on an empty stomach. Add a few cocktails. Taken from the relationship guidebook *Win Love Through Good Credit*. Taken from a tourism guide titled *Everything Worthwhile Costs More Than You Can Afford*. All resort conversation seeks a convergence device. *I don't know*. *I actually* don't *know*. *We'll know when the time is right*. The yogis and lawyers are holding hands. Ask somebody. Ask the front desk to remind you. Write home. Mom worries so.

Pastoral Starring Monica Vitti, Circa 1959

The comrades you remember from their letters have that
crooked look of not really matching anything. You write

about the boathouse last summer, that moment before rain
ringing in your ears. One stills a shaking knee with a touch,

his hand describes this light as something distinct
from birds and their racket in the trees. You run

the four flights of stairs looped in ink, your white dress, knees
white behind linen. There's the sound of men's laughter, stir

of cars down the road. Other times you step from the rain's
last drizzle, feel the crookedness a heart travels in high grass,

on mum wind. Your comrades remember a year by
old stars pressed between photographs, ash and leaf,

perfume baiting the weather and the numb muscles
turned over in their hands. You take the tongue's lather,

dusty September heat. From the station two helium balloons
float away over the transplanted palms of the city.

Night Comes Later

Evan Rehill

SHE IS LOOKING FOR LORAINE. NOVEMBER AND THE DARKNESS coming and Madge is afraid of it and she is afraid of not finding Loraine. This is Seattle. 1986. Loraine had told her, *Come November we're gone.* She walks the streets downtown: south on Fourth, west on Spring. Eyes scanning doorways, alleys. There's a bus shelter up ahead, three kids huddled. CJ, Pearl Earring, Desmond.

I got a fever I can't burn off, Desmond says, smacking his pimpled forehead, *Think a rat bit me.*

CJ's got that sad look-away stare you're not supposed to have till you're older. He spits into the traffic, arms crossed over his jean jacket. The sky falling in gray sheets. Businessmen lower umbrellas, duck into strip clubs. Two women scream in their wheelchairs backwards-rolling down the sidewalk, clubbing one another.

It's 11:15 a.m.

Pearl Earring coughs, turns to Madge. That namesake ear looks infected. *Hear about Whats-his-face*? He slits his throat with a finger wrapped in a dirty band-aid.

Madge asks have they seen Loraine.

Who?

Loretta. Because sometimes Loraine was Loraine and other times she was Loretta.

Two can run faster.

She goes down to the water, watches the ferries come across the Sound and the sad old Indians fishing from the pier, listening to the gulls scream overhead.

Rewind six months. Madge hitchhiked to the city, took up with the kids in the park downtown they call Accidental not Occidental. The kids in Accidental: tenor-voiced panhandlers, tragic con men, teenage whores. Loraine said, *Don't turn tricks. Girls dropping like flies.* Loraine who took her to the rooftop overlooking the Sound. Madge was fourteen (freckle-faced, with pink lips she chewed white) and up there the whole world could go ahead and disappear. *Don't get too comfortable, never know who might show up.* Loraine. Fifteen, with night-dark skin, green eyes that cut to the stairwell door, *Always be ready to grab what you can and run run run!* Loraine charging across the rooftop and all the stars wheeling overhead. Madge chased after her, *But where? Where do we run?* Faster now; the Sound and sky coming close, quick, *Right over the edge!* Loraine skids in her boots, pebbles rushing into the dark, *Like flying! Away!*

Loraine cleaned her fingernails with a matchstick. Loraine sang Bessie Smith between drags on a Newport. Loraine palmed her eyes at night in the sleeping bag they shared. Loretta filed those nails sharp. Loretta cursed at sailors' serenades. Loretta elbowed Madge a black eye in the sleeping bag, slapping her own face.

She walks east on Marion. Nightlight reclines against a lamppost. Black hair plastered to her cheek. Nightlight's older brother Addison stands, hood of his sweatshirt pulled over his face, shaking a paper cup. A sound like two pennies and a dime. Between the raindrops and the passersby he keeps the cup safe, dry, crushed into his armpit. Later these two will go to a laundromat and splurge that dime on one of the big dryers. *Better warm than clean.* In will go their jackets, sweatshirts, their filthy socks. They will sit on the floor, curled into one another beneath the machine's tossing lull.

Addison shakes the paper cup at a crew of men in hard hats, orange parkas. His free hand a slow wave in the air at Madge. She can't see his

eyes inside the hood. Her feet keep walking, fists pumping. Addison hoists the cup into the air—a toast.

She turns a corner, heads south on Second, past black men holding rose-stamped plastic bags over their heads. Dice tossed from hands to a wall covered in graffiti tags (*Smokescreen, Last Dance, Neverever*). She ducks into a repair shop, blowing rotten breath over numbed hands. The floor is piled in dead television sets. One black and white model on the counter, its face full of static. Madge's bloodshot-blue eyes drawn there. She sees wasps swarming a bulb, rain in an unbusted headlight. Toward the back of the shop, behind an American flag hung as a curtain, faint music plays. An oldies station. A fat man in an untucked tropical shirt peeks out from behind the flag, a soldering iron in his hand.

First time she saw Loraine: on her knees, in an alley, petting a cat. Madge jumped from the second floor window of a condemned building, wincing at the sunlight as her body fell through the air. Trash bags exploded when they broke her fall, showering leftover spaghetti, emptied ashtrays, expired coupons, losing lottery tickets, a stained pillow. Madge crawled out of the dumpster, crossing the alley. Another kid leapt from the window, calling out her name as he dropped through the sunlight. That was Whats-his-face, the boy whose name nobody could remember. He'd arrived in Accidental just after Madge. Fifteen-year-old kid with his cardboard suitcase and that strange, unpronounceable name he said was Hungarian. Whats-his-face. He fell, calling *Madge! Madge!,* into the garbage. Her shadow eclipsed the cat on its back then the girl on her knees. Loraine, her tongue clicking at the cat, voice husky in the silhouette eclipsing her, *She's pretty but she won't last.*

Her eyes lift from the screen, feet backpedaling toward the door. A fat man walks through the American flag, tucking in a loud shirt. He's getting close, moving fast. *Looking for something?* A door opens behind and she leaps back, through, out; racing now along the drowned streets, dashing between the traffic lights.

She goes to the arcade full of cigarette smoke and the racket of pinball machines. The too-loud noise of Ms. Pac Man, Galaga. Zeke and Ajax are there, wool hats pulled over their ears, trading looks. They work the room together: Zeke fingers the machines' slots while Ajax watches for the coin attendant, an ex-con with smeared tattoos, an apron filled with silver. Madge's hands buried in the pockets of her army jacket. She watches two other boys with long hair and leather jackets racking a game of pool. Eyes a stack of quarters at the table's edge, where one boy catches her. In his palm an eight ball, spinning. *Get lost.* She steals a crushed-out Old Gold from a plastic ashtray and walks out into the blurred neon.

They learned to pickpocket from a scrawny sixteen-year-old named Jack of Diamonds. Jack of Diamonds, in his pegged pants and dented hat, he told them, *Lose your hands.* Practicing on one another in Accidental, Madge partnered with a thirteen-year-old lisping girl, Michaela, who wore a beret, said she was French but everyone knew she was from Tacoma. You'd see her standing on a downtown street corner at night smoking a clove cigarette, tattered dress clinging to her skeletal frame, poised with an outthrust hip toward the oncoming traffic. Madge tried to forget her hands, let them go out to Michaela, who flinched, lisping, *I'm not ready.*

It was summer when they lost their hands, released the fingers that went out, brought back wallets holding photographs (wedding portraits, school pictures) they tore to shreds. And all the useless keys, flung into the Sound. *Never come back!* Everything after brought to Jack of Diamonds, who'd go off to splurge, return with a jug of blush wine or a dime bag of laughing grass. Jack of Diamonds, a little in love with Loraine he called Loretta. Got loaded one night on horse tranquilizers he crushed up and snorted off a cardboard sign, over the words *Anything Helps*, tracing the curve of a backwards S. Tried putting the hands he remembered on Loraine. His dented hat flying into the air. Her nails tearing at his cheeks. Jack of Diamonds hit the ground spilling tears and blood. Loretta spitting at the felled body, *Thief! Phony! Dead man!*

Loraine said she'd do it for her. If they tried to get their filthy hands on Madge she'd claw their eyes out. Fleeing Accidental, Loraine smearing Jack of Diamonds' blood onto her blue jeans, they ran into the shadows of downtown alleys. Madge's feet sore in her boots hammering the cobblestones. Loraine rushed past a restaurant's back door propped open with a cinder block where Madge paused, tying up a shoelace. Music and voices floated out, along with the smell of oil, rosemary, fish frying in a pan. Lemons and salt water. Madge's stomach moaning. She stared into the doorway, listening to the sound of Loraine's boots running—down an alley, across a rooftop, into the dark.

Madge backtracks north along First. Tourists' umbrellas are sucked inside-out by the wind. She halts before a barroom full of sailors and transvestites, head swiveling left to right, right to left, straight ahead: the open door. There's a popcorn machine inside she has to reach, overflowing in the orange glow of its plastic cage. Two uniformed men arm wrestle at the bar. A group of others growl sea chanteys at the end of the room, pitchers of black beer waving through the smoke. Pretend girls wrap long painted fingernails around straws sunk into their gin and tonics, fake eyelashes batting at Madge—too young to be in here. Madge is at the popcorn machine, opening its plastic door. In a white vinyl booth looking loaded, half-asleep, is What's-his-face. Her stomach folds over itself and she gags, then walks to the kid in the booth. He's pulling a cherry pierced by a tiny red plastic sword out of his glass of Coca Cola. The maraschino's shine in the pulsed neon of an Olympia beer sign. He slides the cherry from blade to mouth, turns to Madge, chewing, eyes all out of focus. It's then she remembers his name.

I heard you were dead, she says.

I heard YOU were dead.

She pinches her forearm, doesn't feel a thing.

Maybe I am.

Maybe we all are.

Sailors slow dancing transvestites across the room, Glen Miller on the jukebox.

I'm looking for Loraine.

The boy rolls his eyes into the back of his head, crossing himself with the sword, forces a laugh sounds like he's choking, *Maybe we all are.*

Halloween Loraine disappeared through the rooftop door. Descended to the streets below full of masks, monsters, ghosts. The sky had gone all the way into the Sound. *Blue plus blue makes black.* Madge sat on the roof's edge watching the scene below: princesses, ninjas, clowns, pirates running through the streets, *Trick or treat! Trick or treat!* Madge spat over the edge, heard the stairwell door slam, whispered, *It's a trick.*

November. 1986. Seattle. Darkness coming. Madge has been alone on the rooftop over a week. No word from Loraine. She is afraid of the dark, the stairwell door opening in the middle of the night, having to gather the sleeping bag and *Run run run!*

She dreams of leaving the edge. In the air she looks back. Loraine in the doorway, waving.

She lies on the rooftop and hears the stairwell door opening and closing, all night long. Clenches her fists and gets ready. The wetness falling drenches her eyelashes. She remembers Loraine relighting a half-smoked Newport under the burn of a July moon, blowing plumes of smoke gone spiraling into what she called evening, not night. *Night comes later.* The stairwell door opens, closes. Loraine said, *Evening the stars come out, but night, that's November, when it goes dark. Run off the edge right into a shadow—they never find your body.* Flicking her cigarette over the edge. Red-orange sailing blue-black. Still talking as she crawls inside the sleeping bag with Madge, *Easy to go into the dark, that's not what I worry about.* Arms holding her close, tight. Curled inside her fist the red plastic sword. Just a whisper now in Madge's ear, *What I worry about, it's coming back.*

Manifesto

Monica Fambrough

Let me be clear. *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* is the name of a 1970 musical starring Barbara Streisand. What could be simpler or more infinite?

A clear object may alter or nourish but it may not obscure.
Light thrives. *I like the way the light hit the ice and glare* is a line from a 2001 single by Nelly.

I will not be making any more pop culture references.
When I said it was simple I lied.

Just because it is clear does not mean it is simple.
All I need is the air that I breathe and to love you.

Sometimes in order to be honest, you lie. You make a transformation. You change sides.

A glacier is not clear or infinite. But it is nimbler than you think. It changes state in an instant. It has no allegiances. It is opaque in places, translucent in others.

Truth is a Lucite rake. It is clear and useful and does not exist. A poem is a real path carved by the fake rake through the leaves.

How to Behave in the Dark

I lay with a small piece of anger still burning
Like smoking in bed

How to protect my home from invasion?

Flatten the schedule
Review the list
Return the videos
Don't call them videos
When they aren't videos

If I Needed Someone

Henry Alcalay

AT TWILIGHT WE LEFT THE DORAL, HEADING NORTH ON COLLINS Avenue: Michael, Leon and me. The Intracoastal Waterway meandered to our left and the sun slid down behind it, past the pastel mansions and the boats tied up before them, leaving the sky bruised-looking, eggplant, green and orange. I glanced back at our hotel, a vast black wedge of glass and marble that needed constant cleaning or it would start looking like a dirty windshield. At the Royal Poinciana apartment house the doorman took one look at our long hair and had us sit where he could see us. He was in his forties with the graying pallor of a canned sardine. C'mere kid, he said, beckoning with one finger. Opening a drawer, he handed me a roll of pennies, pointing out the blue-tiled wishing fountain in the middle of the lobby. Give some to your buddies, too, he said.

We were tossing them when I saw a girl in flip-flops shuffling down the shop-lined hallway leading to the lobby. She talked to herself so I liked her already. She smiled at Michael and Leon. Pam, this is Hertzel, Michael introduced us. She was almost my height—five-seven—with large eyes the mild green of the Listerine my mother used so much of her pores seemed to exude it. The Foster Grants arranged just so atop her blonde hair convinced me she cared a lot how she came across but I didn't think she had to worry: between her eyes, her cheekbones

and her luscious mouth, I just wanted to lean in to see what she smelled like.

The pool was deserted. Its ruffled blue surface looked lonely and cold though the night was as thick as a Calcutta laundromat. Pam went to the lifeguard's stand and turned on his radio. *Me oh my, me oh my, down on the bayou* came Hank Williams singing in this voice that sounded like he had no idea what would happen next, which was how he liked it.

All yours boys, said Pam. We stripped down to our swim shorts. All the way! yelled Leon and we cannonballed. In seconds we surfaced, clawing at our eyes. Goddamn, Pam, shouted Leon, There's so much chlorine it's like swimming in lye, Jesus fucking Christ. We climbed out and toweled off. Leon's eyes were streaked so red they looked like radishes. Pam pushed her hair off her forehead with one finger and appraised us. Wait here, I'll get some water, she said. She turned and cocked one hip with such decision I about heard it snap and then she yanked her shift over her head. I stopped rubbing my eyes and stared; both halves of her teeny white bikini wouldn't have made one handkerchief. The bottom part was so small I saw halfway down the cleft between her cheeks. That suit had no cling—I wondered what would happen if she tried to swim. I'll be back, she said, as if we couldn't cope without her. I watched her walk away and thought, god, what I wouldn't give to feel her dripping off me.

Think she knew? I asked Leon.

Leon's eyes got hard and he considered. Yeah, maybe, he said: she's a bit strange sometimes. Then his eyes softened like it was a good thing.

Friends, are you tired of seeing your tax dollars squandered on those who neither need nor deserve them? The radio inquired. Pam reappeared with a pitcher. While she poured we bathed our eyes. Sorry guys, the one time I swam here I wore goggles, she said.

I looked at her suit again; you can't swim in that, I thought. You were never going to.

Pam was staying with her aunt. She was out so we went up to her apartment. Everything was white including the plush carpeting that seemed custom-made for frolicking on naked. The AC was roaring

and the place smelled of Glade. I have some hash, Pam announced after we'd dressed. We passed it around to proclaim our expertise. Rust-colored and oily, it reminded me of halvah. I didn't care. The only drug I liked was opium, which now and then I'd receive in the mail in small amounts from a friend stationed on the carrier *Oriskany* helping to hurl jets against Vietnam. Roll it in a ball, eat it like a pill and for the next twelve hours everything I needed was already inside me.

Pam produced a pipe. Michael put the hash in and pulled out a lighter.

What about your aunt, when she comes back won't she smell it? I asked.

She's away but in any case she has no sense of smell, said Pam.

I must have looked blank.

Botched nose job, she said: not that she looks bad—she looks quite terrific as far as that goes but they hit a nerve, I guess.

I'll pass, I announced and stepped through the door onto the ocean-facing balcony. The thick air embraced me like a wetsuit. Waves broke on the sand and made a rippling noise like polite applause. I made a little bow as if it was for me, bowing crisply from the waist like the Beatles on *Ed Sullivan*—god, what that must have felt like, I thought: no worries ever again for as long as you live. Thank you, I said, bowing again, thank you.

What are you doing? Pam asked. She'd slipped onto the terrace behind me.

I was—I was just fooling around.

Well, don't let me stop you, she said.

I looked away and wondered where to put my hands, settling for the railing, gritty with dried salt. My face got hot, my tongue was tied and I felt like a fool, having already figured her as someone you'd never quite unravel.

How do you know Michael and Leon? I asked. She'd draped her arms over the railing and we stood side by side, our limbs hanging over like amputated vines.

We go to the same high school, Kew Forest.

I only just met them two days ago myself, I said and she nodded; I supposed they'd told her and I wondered how they'd put it: Hey, get

a load of this guy. I still wasn't certain what they thought of me. We were the same age in the same place and had long hair—at the time that was all it took, at least to start. But I wasn't sure that any minute they wouldn't exchange looks and tell me to get lost.

I had this urge to ask her what they'd said about me—I toyed with the idea, half daring myself, though it wasn't appropriate and probably wasn't fair but she kept staring out to sea and I hesitated. Which was good since seconds later Michael and Leon came out, boisterous from the hash, and I pictured my question dangling there, awkward and unanswered.

The next night Leon and Michael and I went to see pro-wrestling and the night after we hitched across the causeway to Miami proper and saw *Midnight Cowboy.* The third night we put on our suit jackets and ties borrowed from our fathers and picked up Pam at her aunt's apartment. Then we walked back along Collins Avenue to the Fontainebleau, to the Poodle Lounge, where Buddy Greco was performing what he called "An Evening with Lennon and McCartney." We got a good table but being underage they said no alcohol. Pam had borrowed a gown from her aunt—a Dior, she said. Inspired by Balenciaga, she added, looking at me. It elated me, this effort at rapport. Her bare shoulders made her look like she'd been poured into it. But something was off; the dress was old for her and though she looked great, it made her self-conscious, which gave her a pout—self-doubt, I'd read, is sometimes betrayed by the set of your mouth.

It's beautiful, I said. Beautiful on you. She smiled and dropped her eyes. She likes me, I thought. Then I thought, don't be stupid. When our waitress came we ordered shrimp cocktails. To start with, Michael called to her as she walked away. I looked at the ceiling, painted to resemble a night sky in the tropics as if there was no roof, background a soft blue and a thousand stars, each one a tiny off-white dab like little bits of cream cheese left out overnight. The carpeting was Persian, the walls a rich coral and the overhead lights recessed, a hundred lunar orbs.

In this room four years before I'd seen Mia Farrow. She'd just married Frank Sinatra. While her husband sang she sat by the stage, dressed in a diaphanous lilac shift and a plush red headband, which

with her pixie haircut, made her eyes enormous. With both hands she sipped a tall glass of milk. What is she, twelve? Sneered my mother. Onstage Frank had just finished a ballad. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he took a teacup off the piano. "Some a you may be wondering why I got married again," he said and paused to sip. Whiskey, hissed my mother. I thought he might say because he'd just turned fifty and had to wear a toupee. Or because he'd waited his whole life to find her. Or the reason my father gave when I asked him: because it was time, he said, like going to the bathroom.

Frank waited for quiet. Toasted Mia with his teacup. Sipped and wiped his mouth again. "Well, because I finally found me a broad I could cheat on." There was this dead silence in which we could hear the clatter from the kitchen. Mia's head rocked back as if she'd been slapped. The back of her neck reddened. Then the laughter started, harsh, like breaking glass. It went on a while, mostly male, somewhat forced—old men wanting to be part of whatever Frank was selling. It subsided slowly into coughing and throat-clearing. I glanced at my father who'd neither laughed nor smiled. Frank signaled the orchestra and they blasted into "Chicago."

The waitress brought our shrimp, each one plunged headfirst into a layer of ice—like the Jews bury suicides, upside down, I'd heard, and thought of saying so but instead Leon spoke: This won't be as much fun as the women wrestlers, he said.

Pam's mouth opened and her pupils widened. You went to see women wrestle?

Not just women—men as well, Leon said, Although when the men began we left.

Which was true—when the first male wrestlers appeared we looked at one another, stood up, and walked out.

Where was this? asked Pam.

The Convention Center.

How was it? she asked, a peal in her voice like a laugh she was suppressing. It made her eyes brilliant.

Bizarre and barbaric and sexy too, I said.

Sexy, really? Pam said and I wished I'd kept quiet.

Oh, it was definitely sexy, Leon laughed and I felt better.

Sexy, huh, said Pam. But you didn't stay to see the men.

Michael's forehead furrowed and his mouth clamped shut, like a kid about to take some bitter oral unguent. Well, maybe we should have, he said.

And you didn't think to invite me, Pam complained.

Would you have found it sexy, watching men wrestle? I asked.

Her tongue slid out and tapped her lower lip. I don't know, perhaps; don't they wear those little outfits—that can be appealing.

What about the women? Leon asked.

The women, absolutely.

There was a commotion at the entrance to the club: men in wheelchairs, men on crutches, men in uniform coming through the door. Hair so short their ears stuck out. They were but a couple of years older than us and they'd been hacked to bits.

Marines, Leon said.

Two men in this group were whole and they were older; thirty-five or so, their whole lives behind them or so it seemed to me. They were officers in dress uniforms with creases that looked lethal. They were lean and walked with exaggerated posture, their eyes seemed to look just in the direction they were facing—I decided that to walk like that your head had to be empty. Their hair was ridiculous, shaved clean on the sides, a tiny tuft on top. It was intimidating, as if its wearer worshipped violence. I wondered what would happen when they spotted us—they would hate us more than any Viet Cong.

They shepherded their charges down an aisle toward the stage, one officer in front, the other at the rear, in between the wheelchair-bound, the ones on crutches, their stumps swinging, and one guy with an eye patch, the skin of his face and his hairless head mottled like pink taffy. Where his ears had been there were only holes with fleshy whorls that made them look like two huge botched navels. The shattered soldiers made it to their table by the stage. Some chairs had been removed to make room for the wheelchairs. The moment they were seated they all lit cigarettes. They arranged their packs and matches on the table and squinted as they inhaled. I'd never seen people smoke like that, as if everything they'd ever wanted was in

those little butts. Their smoke rose toward the ceiling where it hovered by the lights, forming soft blue clouds.

A waiter pushed a cloth-draped cart onto the stage. The lights in the room dimmed. Time to make the poodle pee, I said.

What? Michael asked, staring at the soldiers.

Time to make the poodle pee, a ritual, I said.

A spotlight lit the stage and a voice boomed out, Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of Ben Novak, owner of the Fontainebleau, welcome to the Poodle Lounge. Meager applause followed and the voice went on. And now, please give a warm welcome to our host, Mort Sendlik. More stingy applause and a skinny man in a shiny tux and a moustache bounded out. How ya doin, how ya doin, how ya doin, folks, Mort said, gathering up the wire from the mike in his hand. Tried to make a joke of it, snapping it this way and that—get back, get back, he yelled. His eyes had a pleading look—a boy's eyes in a man. All right, all right, all right! he yelled. Now let's see what Nina can do for us tonight. His hands shook violently.

A waiter moved the cart to the center of the stage on top of which perched a large mechanical white poodle festooned with jewelry: bracelets stacked on all four paws, a tiara on its head, and tinsel on its tail. Nina's tail wagged, her head moved, her mouth opened and closed, then opened again and she began to bark. What is it you want, Nina, water? Mort asked. He took a bowl from beneath the cart, placed it before her and slyly pushed a button—her head bent in a series of jerks and she appeared to drink. While she drank Mort told a joke: A priest and a rabbi are walking down the street. A little boy approaches. Let's fuck him, says the priest. Out of what? says the rabbi.

Perhaps five people laughed. Nina's rear leg raised mechanically and water ran from her. Oh, Nina, no Nina, no! yelled Mort. A waiter appeared and pushed her cart offstage. Mort went back to acting like the mike cord was a snake and vanished too.

What the hell was that? Michael asked like it was my fault.

The houselights stayed dim, the spotlight onstage brightened and a voice boomed out, Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of Ben Novak,

owner of the Fontainebleau, please give a warm welcome to tonight's star attraction, Mr. Buddy Greco!

Following a drum roll Buddy bounded out. Hep, hep, he said, turning to arrange the mike cord behind him, hep, hep. A quick and dismal smattering of trebly applause, like when I'd hear my mother turning on a tap at two in the morning to fill a glass of water to take a Seconal. Well, Miami Beach, Buddy said with a brief bow. Wonderful to be back here at Ben Novak's astonishing Fontainebleau Hotel, nothing like it in the world, I assure you fine folks—how about a hand for Mr. Novak and what he's done here!

Buddy's face looked like a piece of paper folded many times. He wore a blue Nehru jacket and tight velvet trousers. I decided he must hate the Beatles: they'd made him irrelevant—how could he not despise them? He glanced at the soldiers. Did he know they'd be here? Their presence so close presented obligations.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you know, a great many of the most beautiful songs written in the past five years have been composed by a fantastically talented pair of young men from Liverpool . . . he went on about what an honor it was for him to be there to sing them to us. And the first song, he continued, I want to dedicate to these fine young men before us who have given so much in the defense of liberty and justice and really the best way of life I know of, the way we live right here in the good old U.S. of A. He paused and scuttled over toward the soldiers. His eyes narrowed into a squint as if he had a dirty joke but just for them. I gotta tell you boys one thing and one thing only, he said in a husky whisper: those sacrifices were worth it—betcha by golly and how. He winked at them, then turned to the audience and spoke more loudly: weren't they worth it, folks? He waved his mike, eliciting the most ragged response of the night. Buddy bowed his head. A single spotlight shone down. More speaking than singing, he began:

Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away

The soldiers studied Buddy. Cupping their cigarettes they nodded in agreement. Someone put a spotlight on them. A few people clapped. Buddy advanced to the edge of the stage where he knelt on one knee, looming over the GIs—friend or foe, I pictured them deciding.

Suddenly, I'm not half the man I used to be
There's a shadow hanging over me

Another ripple of applause. Friend, he's a friend, the soldiers decided.

Oh, I believe in yesterday.

Buddy bowed and took out a handkerchief and wiped his face and neck. Well, if that song doesn't say it all, he said with a sickly smile. "If I Needed Someone," he announced the next song, turning to the band, snapping his fingers as he counted down but before he finished Leon stood and called out, Hey Buddy, you can't sing that. Buddy stopped and looked up. Shielding his eyes from the light with his hand made it look like he was saluting, which made the officers snap him back a pair of smooth ones. Buddy snapped one back and resumed his perusal. Leon waved. Buddy saw him. That song is by George Harrison, Leon said. So you can't sing it if the show is called "An Evening with Lennon and McCartney."

Buddy removed his handkerchief and wiped his face again. I laughed and thought of all the time he must have had to spend memorizing the words to those songs, livid every second at how these punk kids had come out of nowhere to ruin everything. Some people in the audience snickered.

Yes, I can, sit down, said Buddy, which got the most applause so far. He went through the count again and began to sing:

Carve your number on my wall and maybe you will get a call
From me
If I needed someone

Buddy's eyes looked as depthless as old sour candies, as if he was singing phonetically in a foreign language.

You guys got me all dressed up to come and see a crazy man, Pam said. Michael rose and took her elbow. Leon and I stood. You can have these shrimp, Buddy, Leon called out as we left.

We went out to the pool and stretched out on chaise lounges. Beyond a fringe of palms beat the ocean's plangent roar.

Those soldiers, said Leon. He shook his head.

Dangling the bait, said Michael.

What? Leon asked.

That's what they call our strategy: send soldiers out tramping through the bush, hoping they'll attract the enemy, then blast them with jets and artillery. Half the time that stuff must fall on our own guys. Michael pursed his lips. I thought Nixon said he would end it but now it doesn't look that way at all.

My dad says it won't end till the money's all been made—same as every war, he says, Leon said.

On the water we could see the lights of ships at sea: freighters, I surmised. They may have looked romantic but I knew better—my uncle once owned a few. Rat-ridden and battered with grim soiled quarters and no privacy. Lukewarm salt water showers. Lonely sailors far from home, speaking different languages. Off port they can bob for days, waiting to be cleared. Romantic indeed.

Well, I'm pretty sleepy, Pam declared; I wonder, can I persuade Hertzel to walk me home?

I was so happy to hear that—at times in the lounge I'd felt her eyes on me but I hadn't dared look back, afraid to break the spell. Let's walk on the beach, I said.

In these heels? She scoffed.

We went through the lobby and out onto Collins Avenue, the lights of each hotel we passed beckoning with its promise of clean cool sheets, pastel rooms, and easy dreamless sleep. The doorman at her building stood in the driveway, smoking. He smiled at her and smirked at me, as if thinking she could do better. The wishing well worked, I told him. Pam led me down the store-lined hallway to a door with frosted glass on which was written Robert Langer, DDS. She tried the door, which was locked. Taking a key from her purse she opened it. What are we doing? I asked, my mouth by her ear. I'd have been happy to spend the next hour just inhaling her. Squeezing my arm, she had me enter first. There was that familiar smell and a whirring sound from an instrument panel, which glowed red, providing just enough light. Pam sat me in the chair. There, she reassured me when the arm clicked into place. Through the half drawn blinds I could see the building's lush interior courtyard. I think we'll just close these, she informed me. With a foot pedal she flattened the chair till I was nearly prone. Then she dropped it down so I was

almost on the floor. I got an erection and a bit later a wet spot—I felt its coolness on the inside of my trousers.

Pam leaned over me and snapped on a bib. Her bare shoulders smelled like dry oatmeal.

Whose office is this?

My uncle's.

The husband of your aunt upstairs?

Her second, she said.

Where is he?

Around . . . tonight he's at a party.

And her?

In Tangier with her lover.

Oh . . . so, I guess if you know, your uncle does also?

Fun is an important part of life. As adults we can all agree on that.

I'm not an adult, I said.

Let's just put this on, Pam said, placing a mask over my nose. Laughing gas, she said: This won't hurt a bit.

How do you know what you're doing?

Last summer I was his assistant. Relax, you're in good hands. Pam turned a knob on a green tank, which started hissing softly. At first nothing happened but then I became aware of a disruption in the way sound reached me, as if it were being filtered through a wrinkle—it came in waves, connecting up inside me only after it had passed through. Pam sat at my side, her fingers on my wrist. The hum of the instrument panel became louder and metallic and changed into the sound of every plane I'd ever been on, turbines whining as it waited on the runway. Then it became a guitar—a series of them, in fact. I started hearing solos I'd been listening to for years, Hendrix, Beck, Clapton, Garcia, coming together in a grinding feedback-saturated serenade that shifted back and forth from sounding musical to industrial. Voices entered in a mournful chant: freedom from want, freedom from fear, over and over, repeating themselves. I recognized it from the Passover service we had every year, part of the response to one of the Four Questions. Hearing that relaxed me further: Pam in charge, the gas—as if in the end, like the voices promised, things take care of themselves.

There, now how was that? Pam asked, removing the mask. Dabbing some balm on my lips, she took off the bib. Okay, my turn: hold my wrist so you can feel my pulse and if it slows down, turn the gas off here. She slipped on the mask and leaned back in the chair. Seeing me hesitate she said, Hertzel, I trust you—it's fine.

We'd put two chaise lounges side by side and were stretched out by the pool. Neither of us spoke—that we didn't have to said it all. A man in a tux with combed dark hair, a shorter man in a loincloth, and a woman dressed as a squaw with feathers, buckskins and paint on her face came through the door from the lobby and approached the pool. The man in the loincloth was nearly nude, the Indian was beautiful and the man in the tux had his hands in his pockets, bringing up the rear, exuding an air of indifference that was quite captivating, really. He looked like he'd stepped from a whiskey ad. They stood at the deep end, murmuring, the man in the loincloth sipping from a highball glass.

I glanced at Pam, who had sat up and was watching. Even in the aquamarine light from the pool I could see her pupils were enormous. I followed her stare and saw it was directed at the man in the tux. He gazed back placidly, smiling with his mouth shut. After a while, his hands still in his pockets, he strolled toward us.

Pam's eyes stayed on him like a tracking vector. How are you darling, he said, leaning over her, one hand still in his pocket, the other caressing her cheek, then going back to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. It lingered there a moment and then he stood up straight. You could about hear the whir of the electricity between them. He was in his forties with unsettling eyes, midway between brown and green, the color thick like an impasto of paint had been swabbed onto the cornea.

Hi, I'm Bob, he said, extending his hand. I stood and took it but somehow my palm closed over his fingers, botching the ritual. I'm Hertzel, I said. You win, I felt like adding.

Pam was flustered. Oh, I'm sorry, I should have—

It's okay. How was Buddy Greco?

Ridiculous. How'd your party turn out?

See for yourself. He nodded toward the others but Pam's eyes stayed on him. I thought it might be fun to take them to Harry's Bar at the Eden Roc and see if they'll serve us, he said. Nice to have met you, he told me. He turned to Pam: Well, darling, enjoy the rest of your evening. Pam's mouth was slack, her eyes drunk with desire, like a two-year-old whose cheeks are smeared with chocolate and knows there's more to come.

We watched him walk back along the pool toward his comrades. Drawing close, he nodded and they fell in beside him. Pam and I resumed our chaise lounges. I leaned back and looked at the black sea and the distant freighters and the stars and the moon where men had first walked a month before: all that endless vastness and the only life is here—what sense does that make, I wondered. And then I thought, who cares: the sailors on their ships, the soldiers without limbs, Pam's uncle, Ben Novak, even Buddy Greco—what control have I got over anything? I looked at the stars again and the sky behind them, a celestial curtain, deep and velvety: use the stars as buttons to secure the folds, keeping out the emptiness, at least till morning comes.

The Glossies

Jennifer Styperk

I'm going to ask you to see the sexy glossy sexy—the sexy demure chin down, eyes up sexy, sexy around the edges of pursed lips sexy, sexy that's on every page sexy, sexy leading eyes around the four corners sexy, the neighbor coveting sexy, the sexy porn star whispering unheeded no's sexy, the sexy dinner conversation with sexy, the man yelling whore after the sixteen year old sexy, the sellable, the high school male convicted on nine accounts of rape of female peers sexy, the sexy-to-mores, the more and more.

A Description

Catherine Despont

ONE THOUGHT STOOD OUT ABOVE ALL WHEN I MET JIM. IT WAS—now the real things would begin. I would stop pretending. I would act like myself. But then it contributed to another thought the meaning of which was less clear—the idea that the past was the longing for him. As though he'd come in answer to that time before, which felt so empty and still so full of destructiveness.

A friend once told me about a cave he found with his brother on a canoe trip—a small opening in a cliff directly at the water that led to a cavernous space, hundreds of feet deep and maybe thirty in height, where they could only speak in bare whispers because the acoustics of the chamber amplified everything to a deafening level—and that seems to me the perfect description of my need then. I felt like the reverberations of what I wanted were so overwhelming I could barely say it.

He came through my door. He was a friend of a friend. For no specific reason his entrance felt dramatic. He seemed so tall I thought he must have bent his head to come in. I felt like I knew him from his posture—the way you recognize the David, a ready repose in his limbs, that same far-gazing attitude. His nose and lips and jaw reaffirmed that impression of the statuesque, the classical. When we were introduced he said Hello in a formal kind of singsong, like our hunting parties had just crossed in the woods. It felt like I met him on a stage—that

something would be played out. He cradled his head in his hand, and supported it at the elbow with the other while he spoke. He was all joints and tendons—his frame full of movement, like the nearly imperceptible motion of a suspension bridge. His eyebrows moved around his forehead. He laughed, not deeply, but with an explosive HA as though he found things funny despite himself. He ran his hands through his hair while he talked about his job in a way that looked like a pantomime of tearing it out. Recalling it now it's hard to believe it didn't seem like posturing. I'm struck by the theatricality of my description. I'm so sensitive to acting generally. It wasn't that his didn't seem like acting, but that it seemed familiar. That very night I told a friend I was in love. It didn't bother me that she laughed.

For some reason he carried a small backpack the whole night, which became symbolic when I discovered we'd been to the same grade school. I loved the neatness of meeting a person from my past for the first time. And he seemed sad, not in a passing, moody way, but habitually which gave something like good sportsmanship to his participation in everything. I imagined him leaving the party for a small, dark apartment, closing the door and then shedding his clothes behind it like a coat of lead. I imagined him sinking to his mattress and falling into a deep, deaf, protective sleep that desired to be unbroken—attractive thoughts because I was hardly sleeping. When I drifted away I woke up again feeling like a person regaining consciousness in an accident, stumbling in shock with some explanation about a stove—like everything I said and did was only distantly related to the situation.

In that time before we met beautiful things would make me cry. I would cry without noticing. Often the idea that it was beautiful didn't register before I felt the tears on my cheek, and then it wasn't a searing, overwhelming thought, but like I was being pushed to admit something painful again. Nothing gave me relief. I would meet someone for lunch. I wouldn't remember what we talked about. To my anxiety it only felt like I switched the load between a different set of muscles. Once, as I walked home, crowds of people were in the streets and the sun was very bright. They'd set up small stages and across one people were demonstrating a flying, kicking, martial art. I don't know

why I stopped because I was desperate to get home. The performers were very fast, strong and graceful, but it was hard to tell because the music was so distracting, the volume deafening. I felt my face start to squint. I thought maybe the sun had gotten in my eyes, but I put my hands to them and realized I was crying. Somehow it felt like, against my will, the beauty would get in and confirm that I didn't know what I needed.

It was night the first time I visited his apartment. He wouldn't turn on the light. He led me to the couch in the dark and gave me the tour by describing everything. He was embarrassed actually. But afterwards I realized it wasn't so much the shabbiness he was embarrassed to show, but that he loved these things—loved their brokenness, their improvisation, the fact that so little was enough for him and that he didn't want to change it.

We undressed to our underwear. His white cotton shorts shone in the dark. He shook so badly I wasn't sure what to do. He didn't know how to explain it either, but I felt I wanted to be shaking too—wished my body would also do something inexplicable for the occasion. He couldn't be still. We held each other and rolled in a seasick way, like we were thrown around. Then we stopped and lay side by side, holding hands. I lay there awkwardly, feeling younger than I ever had.

He left me early in the morning for work and so I saw it at first light by myself. Somehow the spell had worked—I saw the tapestry, as he called it, covering his desk—a piece of flowered fabric—the silver print—a reproduction photo of a Colorado town—the World War II antique—a strange memorial lamp made of bullets from his grandfather's military service—and I looked at the Christmas cards and photographs placed along the edge of the kitchen wainscoting, and was convinced of the significance of the whole strange assortment—the cheapness of everything was supplanted by some other value—personal, emotional, historical. They almost impressed me more than nicer things—they all seemed to have grown from him. And I felt another thing, as I sat at his rusted kitchen table and looked out—as he'd instructed—through the back window of his Brooklyn tenement, into the green leaves of a single tree that managed to obscure the whole dingy city, sitting with my elbows between dirty

coffee cups and a jar of pens, and pads of letter paper with half-drafted notes—I had the feeling of the hours he'd spent like this, of Jim's relief in the solitude of this unlikely place. It seemed magical to have found, in a far off neighborhood, in a tiny apartment, with a weird collection of things, the one thing I hadn't been able to cultivate myself—a resting place. And instead of finding it all very peculiar, the precariousness of Jim's arrangement seemed just like the proof of how hard it was to make.

Fragment No. 17
Mexicói Utca

Giuseppe O. Longo

. . . INSOMNIA, AND IN THIS OLD GROUND FLOOR APARTMENT, insomnia is more obstinate than in Trieste, if for no other reason than the regular passing of trains which shake the whole house, the house of Aunt Margit, they make the old living room chandelier swing, the one I turn on toward 2 a.m. when I wake up and it seems that I really cannot go back to sleep, with all the sleep hard as a fist between the eyes, I go to the window and from below I look up and watch for a long moment the railroad bed, high, thick with acacias and brambles made yellow by the rare lamplights and here is another train dark black fast rumbling in the night and after a few seconds the house begins to tremble and sway, it doesn't tremble immediately, only after a few seconds, when the train has already half passed and it seemed that this time the house would not shake, but no it begins to shake, once the train has passed it returns to silence, at night the street is deserted, in this southernmost suburb of Pest I have seen grassy paths, low little houses, trees in flower, I have breathed that exasperating odor that circulates in the air, lime trees and jasmine, it is almost country, then I leave the window and turn toward the room and in that dim light the furniture watches me, the closets, the cupboards, the upholstered little chairs stained with old excretions and body fluids, Aunt Margit died a few months ago, in April, she was ninety-seven, Gyula told me that they had patched her together with

various operations, she had an artificial anus, never a complaint, but she could not retain her body fluids, the emanations godgodgod, that's why the bed, the stained chairs, he told me this yesterday afternoon when we were visiting the railway museum, she had raised him, that frail little boy, he had become a genius in mathematics, but he was always sad, he had never managed to forget that Russian soldier who had shot his parents in the courtyard, without a reason, he was six years old and his eyes and ears and head were always filled with those shots, the rifle in the arms of the Russian, it seemed like a game to aim the rifle at those two who were walking, but who knows what went through his head, that soldier, to aim and then fire from the high window into the snowy courtyard, and he, little Gyula, Gyuszi, Gyuszika, from the doorway of the apartment on the ground floor looking onto the courtyard, had seen his parents fall who were coming toward him and had already nodded toward him and smiled toward him but they had remained there, on the snow, had fallen and remained there, the Russian soldier had fired from the window, the window had opened and the soldier had appeared, had taken the rifle in his arms and fired, twice, aiming calmly, he didn't remember which of the two had fallen first, it still seemed to him like a game, now his parents would get up, first papa, then mama, first papa would get up and would have helped mama get up, mama would have laughed embarrassed, he would have brushed her coat full of snow a few times, to clean it, then she would have helped papa to clean himself, he already saw papa turn toward him, look at him with his half-closed eyes and laugh silently, with a little breath, a little whistle through his teeth, one of those little jokes he knew how to make, the closed window had opened and the soldier had appeared, he, Gyula, had noticed it because, in opening, the window had sent a flash of sunlight at him, at the ground-level door of the little apartment where he was waiting for his parents, they had passed through the huge door and the very high porch, had entered the courtyard, around the courtyard there were many other doors, homes and offices, there was a blacksmith, a carpenter, there was a shoemaker, the artisans that are usually in the big courtyards, they work in their little shops but now he was not looking at the shops, he was looking

at that window which was open there, above, on the wall opposite, at the window there was a soldier, a Russian soldier, he saw his face clearly, a young face, blue eyes, blond mustache, the beret of a Russian soldier, the insignia of a Russian soldier, he had taken the rifle calmly into his arms and then there was the shot and then the other shot, the echo and then again the echo, and after a little a woman had begun to scream in the air in the light in the snow, a continuous howl, slow, which never ended, the Russian soldier had closed the window, another dazzle of light in the eyes and still his parents did not get up and he was uncertain, he understood that the longer they stayed there the more sinister the game became, a few moments before he had seen them from behind the glass of his door window enter through the big door and walk into the courtyard, on an angle, tramping over the dirty snow, full of footprints and tracks black with mud, but how can you remember, I ask him, and he tells me he has everything before his eyes, I have done nothing but think about it all these years, but you can't remember, I say, memories change, change continuously, yes, he says, but certain things can't be forgotten, the Russian at the window, the bodies in the snow, the sounds of the gunshots, I still see all the gutters that pock-marked the wall opposite, the hinges, the exhausts from the stoves, the bumps in the plaster, the closed windows, that one wide open, it is like a movie that goes, stops, backs up, starts again, sometimes it gets stuck on some particular, then stirs again, and in telling this he has bright empty eyes as though he were looking onto another world, now with my family there in the snow I was on the verge of crying, but I knew that I mustn't cry, then there was a lot of confusion, people coming and going, I don't remember anything else, there had been the shot and then the other shot, the dark stain my parents' coats made on the snow, then he is silent for a long time, as if he was about to cry, but he doesn't cry, he looks at me and shakes his head, Aunt Margit had been there to take care of him and had made him study and only after fifteen years had he spoken to his aunt about the shots, the soldier, for fifteen years he hadn't cried, had said nothing, asked nothing, he had closed down, he had studied hard, his parents had been shot like pigs in the snow and he closed down, turned to stone, he had become a great mathemati-

cian, I move away from the window, turn toward the bed, but I experience a vague repugnance, that apartment on the ground floor is still inhabited by Aunt Margit, there are her memories, her excretions, her bodily fluids, her smells, they have cleaned, of course, but over here somewhere hides a grayish tangle of her last ruffled hair, over there is a clump of something that has to do with her body, skin, dandruff, scales, I have never seen Aunt Margit, but I see the little glassed-in case with her books, the cabinet with the plates and the glasses lined up, the enormous wall mirror, enclosed in a floral frame decorated with slender feminine figures that change into plants, it is not a physical repugnance that I experience, but a moral disgust, an incomprehension before the facts of life and death, of course there was not the time or place to do an investigation into a soldier who had killed two civilians in an occupied country, the war had just ended, there were plenty of other problems, people had to work, keep warm, eat every day, so Margit had taken him, that baby, who else could have taken him, that sad frail child, black hair hazel eyes, there wasn't even any longer the possibility of making a priest of him, it wasn't done anymore, in fact it was suspect, maybe at night he cried, at first, he was after all only six years old, when the mama is that great and warm thing who hugs us and we feel the tenderness of it, but during the day never a word, never a tear, never a sigh, only that fathomless sadness in the eyes and within all the things he told me yesterday afternoon in the railway museum, they say it is the largest railway museum in the world, acres and acres in open air, under the July sun, locomotives of every kind on the grass, cranes, enormous snow plows, machine rooms, hangars, railroad cars from the nineteenth century, there is even Franz Joseph's imperial train, Gyula insisted that I drive the diesel locomotive of the Hungarian State Railway placed at the disposition of the public for a trial run, and afterward they gave me a certificate, a diploma, *oklevél*, I have my place in the history of this glorious institution, the sense of power that driving a locomotive for a mile gives you, and how could it happen, I ask him when I come down, and he shrugs, I never look at it like that, he says, the how and the why don't interest me, almost sixty years have passed, there's no more pain in him, there is maybe the memory of pain, had there been

a trial, I don't think so, had they punished him, transferred him, sent him to Siberia or wherever, I don't know, I know nothing and finally it doesn't interest me, I lived with my aunt, she loved me, then I met my wife, we married, the children, the career, the honors, my travels, all the women I've had who were perhaps one-night stands, he gives himself to sex with profound conviction, made of innocence and integrity, he can't resist the seduction of the beautiful women he meets at conferences, he takes them to bed, it must be a form of compensation, I say, could be, he doesn't like to look into things, he doesn't like history at all, this tells a lot about him, history is useless, he says, for him there is only mathematics, mathematics and the women he takes to bed, this extreme simplification of life has always impressed me, I don't approve, or maybe I simply don't understand, but I hide all this, he has started his two sons in mathematics, I would like to tell him that all that is a retaliation for that ancient assassination, but he wouldn't understand, he wouldn't want to understand, instead I ask him what his father did for a living, he was a clerk somewhere, my mother too, he doesn't know much about it, about his parents, a vast repression, an amputation of the soul, then a functionary of the Museum comes to meet us and begins to show us something, he opens and closes the doors of the train cars, has us climb up and points out details, he speaks in a hurry, I get tired of following the explanations, my mind wanders, when we come out of the hangar the sun beats down on the rusty tracks, on the multicolored masses of wood and metal, beyond the surrounding wall I see scattered blocks of flats, windows and elaborate little balconies, walls with floral patterns flaking from neglect, sloping roofs decorated with wrought-iron spirals and squiggles, clothes hung out to dry, someone appears in the windows, let's go, I say, we look for the car, we walk through the grassy little streets among little yellow houses, ancient villages now swallowed by the big city, cracked sidewalks, elms and locust trees, a few little country restaurants, everything feels old, but fascinating, comfortable, Molnár and *csárda* and my childhood memories, evening radio dramas, when I wasn't suffering from insomnia in my savory half-sleep the voices of the actors mixed with my flickering visions, creating rigorous and incongruous paths that dropped off into sleep,

while now, here in Aunt Margit's apartment, something clutches the opening of my stomach, and I don't know if it is the loss of a hope, the sign of suffering, the prelude to a defeat, and another train passes going who knows where into the dark countryside that seems to sleep, whereas probably like me many are stirring now in their rooms, between the corner shelves and the big walnut table, looking for their lost sleep, then I go into the bathroom, turn on the blinding light, the tub and the sink assail me with their whiteness, from the window wide opened onto the courtyard I see the fig tree, the little wall, the wire fence, the house opposite is dark, impenetrable, it is three in the morning, four more hours and upstairs the others will be waking too, we will make breakfast, then we'll bustle around the glamorous streets downtown, then return to Mexicói utca with its torn up sidewalks, the railway beds, the trains that pass continuously, the old house that trembles . . .

Translated from the Italian by James B. Michels.

Nevada City Diary

Louis B. Jones

January 24, 2010

WITH BAD WEATHER NOW UPON US, CAVENDISH SEEMS TO BE taking up permanent residence. (The plaid fold-out couch in Dash's playroom, on the NE corner first floor.)

Beside his bed, his scarred muddy laptop and his boxed "household gods": books and magazines, vegetable oil, flashlight, pancake mix, potato chips, old rusty chrome ratchet-and-socket set, whole-wheat Fig Newtons, duffelbag—all are stacked up before the drawers of Legos, Tinker Toys.

His large, long shoes by the kitchen door, with their associated puddle. His health drink in the fridge. His different (better!) brand of coffee beans. His question at the cupboard *Where does this go?* His dependable yeomanly contributions of cottage cheese, wine. He makes a trip out for potable water in this power-outage emergency.

I ran into him tonight in town. Before the little David Lindley concert, I'd stopped at a café on Broad Street where Luke and Maggie have a regular dinner-music gig—and there was Cavendish at the counter, wearing heavily swagged scarf and tam-o'-shanter beret. Picture Andrew Jackson in tam-o'-shanter. (Or Samuel Beckett, more like.) He took the stage for a while. It seems to be the season of Robert Burns's birthday, and Cavendish "Can Sometimes Be Prevailed Upon" to recite Burns's poems.

Which he's committed to memory and delivers in an astringent Scottish burr.

The "wee sleekit cow'rin tim'rous" mousie made his appearance, and also a fine poem—"An' a' that"—about the dignity of the lowly common fellow compared with the transparent tinsel vanity of the superior folk. People, to applaud, put down their knives and forks. He lifts his arms in a harp-shape at the end of a poem, presses one heel into the other foot's instep.

Much later that night I'm home from the David Lindley show and Cavendish is still up. He says he's had "a transcendent evening." Around the corner from the café, they'd all gone to Friar Tucks, he and the musicians. There, he was again prevailed upon to recite (this time the entire long one about the Cutty Sark, which he's got by heart), and the very old scotch whiskey was brought down and passed around in salute to the great soul Robbie Burns.

(It's true. There aren't many great souls that pass among us. Burns was one. Cavendish another.)

Time for bed. Time for Cavendish to go to work on his laptop all nite composing e-mails. Time for me to join Brett in the cottage, where she's keeping her mother company. Cavendish says goodnight, but he has to pee first, and heads out the backdoor into the storm. I tell him, "Wait, the power is on. The pump is working. You can use the toilet." But he says no, he prefers peeing outside. Always has. More environmental.

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February 1, 2010

Found some bricks! On the Ridge across the river, the gold-mining enterprises left behind a brick mansion, which today is in ruin. Vigorous cedars stand in its center. Bricks can be dug out of the forest soil, to come here for paving. Irregular, manufactured on-site in nineteenth c. fired in Chinese-built kilns at the riverside, now they're eroded in little loaves, muffin-textured, they'll be tender under bare feet.

The forgetful, unlettered West. Memory persists in mute artifacts. I built the bookshelves in the mud room out of old three-by-eight

timbers from the falling-down barn at the end of Cement Hill Road where the legendary Antonio used to sit and drink red wine, contemplating his one beloved cow, dreaming of Jalisco and Sinaloa. (Whence finally he vanished again.)

This week at A.P.P.L.E. (Alliance for a Post-Petroleum Local Economy) Neighborhood Readiness workshops are being offered, teaching "easy low-cost ways to package bulk foods in nitrogen at home," so that when the peak-oil apocalypse arrives, we in the mountains will still eat.

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From the novel:
"Fundamentally everybody always knows everything: it's a basic working principle of society: everybody knows literally everything: instead there are just layers of *self*-deception."

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February 14
My anti-film-festivals crack. It's not the festivals themselves, nor the movies. Movies are great. So are moviemakers. The problem is: what happens to the towns over subsequent years: Park City and Mill Valley were both once quiet lovable places. H'wood injects its virus. Twenty years later you've got the actual panthers and cheetahs of Rodeo Drive slinking in the very streets, or rather their imitators. People think that can't happen here.

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The town's movie theatre.
It's a storefront. Flat non-sloping floor. Armchairs. Charles has only one projector, so the reel-change requires a long intermission, including reel rewind. Charles bakes brownies, something to serve to his patrons during the unavoidable break. We can all *smell* Charles's brownies baking during reel one. Then comes intermission. All stand around out front and eat his hot brownies, while Charles, behind his velvet curtain, rewinds the first reel and threads the leader of reel two into the sprockets.

Charles's big interest, personally, is in short subjects. He is a connoisseur and archivist of cartoons, public-service spots, newsreels. So the audience must be patient with his opening lecture about the provenance and significance of the Looney Tunes we were about to see, before the feature. He stands in front of the screen as he lectures, in his characteristic twilight, wringing his hands with ardor for his subject.

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End of day. Out on our road, as I drove by in dusk coming home, two vultures were courteously taking turns, pecking at the now-famous little carcass at the roadside. Early dark of winter days. Cold. I use old Squaw submissions as tinder for the stove.

(Something like a "rush hour" is audible these days, from the direction of Highway 49, now that Erikson Lumber has been selling off parcels on its tracts for development.)

On the deck railing, a plate holds rainwater and one bloated pizza crust: Brett's yeasty homemade pizza dough. Dew on the wheelchair, even this late in the day. Brett reports she thinks Barbara may have had yet another mini-stroke in the art gallery today after I left them: an awkward moment of listlessness. However, she smiles symmetrically. Lifts her two arms symmetrically. Knows who the president is. She's fine. At eighty-seven, as charismatic as ever, if still inconsolably sad.

As I came up the driveway, Cavendish's truck stood parked in the grass. Cavendish has gone in hospital today for a routine colonoscopy involving anaesthesia. But he is still living primitively out in the river canyon, so has asked if he may convalesce here at our house for one night. It's a privilege: to serve as a lamp by the side of the road. He arrives, post-colonoscopy, looking debonair as ever, looking as usual like Andrew Jackson on the twenty. At dinner he is very knowledgeable and informative about polyps, villi and microvilli, lipid metabolism, bile. For Dash's entertainment, Cavendish has a joke:

"Why don't wild animals eat clowns?" he asks Dash, and immediately tells him, "*Because they taste funny!*" causing delight in Dash.

Barbara across from him in candlelight, digging her way through her polenta, chuckles grimly to herself and remarks, "Hm. We should've thought of that."

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In comparison to my solar panels, my clothesline uses photons with maximum efficiency. And with the lowest-tech implements: string and clothespins.

[I continue to indulge these clothesline remarks because the clothesline is such a happy emblem of everything we're in for. As we've, quite justly, exported our so-called "middle class" overseas, we will import a straitened wise frugality from the peasant villages of Mexico and China and Nigeria. This is all for the good. This is all wonderful.]

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Big epiphany: I don't need, anymore, to practice my fond old superstitions. (Penny discoveries; the recurrence of 11:17 on clock faces; my lucky coffee mug; etc.) Here is why superstitious practices are fallacious: they are premissed on the notion that I *have* any desires, or that is, desires whose consequences I can intend and prefer.

Therein lies the traditional "error" of the astrological chart, the rabbit's foot, the horseshoe, the burnt offering, the found cloverleaf. The problem is not that superstitions are an "idolatry." (Such is the childish objection: that one seems to be "worshipping another or false god"—the god of pennies—or the leprechauns.) Rather the good-luck ritual involves the mistake that I might, wisely, want anything at all.

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The Father of the Uncertainty Principle

The physicist Niels Bohr, as an old man, had retired to his cabin on a fjord. But he was sought out by an interviewer. The interviewer asked about the lucky horseshoe nailed over the cabin door. "You're a scientist. Surely you don't believe in that stuff."

Bohr's actual response. "Oh, no, I don't believe in it, no, but that kind of thing will work whether you believe in it or not."

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March 2010
Got unstuck with my L.A. 1946 novel. Featureless characters finally showed themselves.

The arbitrariness of the process: All I needed to do was be brave and sketch on an eyebrow. Then the one little creature started provoking the others. The eyebrow was what started it.

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March. Two feet of snow in a single night. Up at eight thousand feet they'll have more than three feet.

Cavendish showed up, in his tall battered truck, and we added to the spaghetti.

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When, as a young man in the 1960s, Cavendish left school and "came back West," it was to come to Relief Hill, a remote inaccessible spot on the Ridge, once a mining encampment, where his family had owned, but at some point sold off, a tract of land with some empty cabins. He and a gang of friends rented those cabins back from the new owners—this is after Woodstock, after the protests, after VISTA in Philadelphia, after Chicago, after cab-driving in NYC. The particular virtue of the place, the thing he'd come back for, was the spring under the live-oak, whose water was sweet and abundant and dependable. Tonight here, by candlelight, taking refuge here from his unheated, snowbound trailer in the unfenced canyon, he boasted that the watercress around that spring was so lush, it was a great *bog* of watercress as big as this room (swinging an arm). He says some day when the roads are clear he'll show me Relief Hill.

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March 23, 24. Snow continues. Buckets of muddy water stand in the bathroom to refill toilet tank.

****

Spring 2010 (San Francisco)

Driving the pickup truck out Lombard toward the GG Bridge and out of town, I'm carrying funereally the last dust of Oakley's small empire, plaster chunks, painting debris, rotten splintery lath, carpet tacks, the carpetpad-sponge's stale toasty-orange dust-crumbs, the whole heap under a lashed-down remnant of carpet. It's been two years since his death; and Brett and I spent this week working, clearing out his old office in Macondray Lane. Today that little room has two fresh coats of paint of a shade commercially called linen. Freshly assembled furniture that was purchased by clicking on an "Add-To-My-Cart" button.

The room feels bigger now. One thing you miss about a man when he's gone for good: everything he knew. (That he knew what a "shibboleth" is; or a decent restaurant in Reno; or Bob Dylan's real name; that he knew Henry James's invidious remark about the size of Wharton's advances; that he knew what an "objective correlative" is; that he knew the point-of-view tricks in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, and Miriam Makeba, and Keith Richards's solo albums, and the treacherous coast road to Hana; that he knew the clever left-turn strategy off Newport Boulevard; that he knew how to be patient and forgiving.) All of it is gone, gone with him. "Everything he knows" is an element essential to a man, more essential than the heartbeat, or the 98.6 degrees, or the characteristic smell, or the misshapen old chair, or the Subaru that went to Tracy and lives now in Arizona. Everything a man knows is a quantity hard to enclose. It's a vanished, immense, galactic genome. Twenty-five boxes of books came out of that cramped room, freckled with mold, histories of San Francisco and the west, accounts of the Mormon migration, cowboy tales, biographies of eminent Californians, the Illiad and Parsifal, John Wesley Powell, *Men to Match My Mountains*, Wallace Stegner, Ambrose Bierce, *Champagne Days of San Francisco*, *Resumés of the Great Operas,* maps of European and Mexican towns, books by his old friends whom nobody would find collectible anymore, gold rush anecdotes and accounts of the Dakota-range wars, all the scholarship

of a serious writer of historicals and Westerns. On Lombard Street, afternoon traffic is fast and orderly, and my heavy-laden pickup truck fits into the flow. Near the GG Bridge ramp-up, among motels and tourist-seafood dens, a towering billboard displays a photograph of a baby, a gigantic beautiful infant girl, rosy and alert and warm, with the message (the work of a pro-life group): "HEARTBEAT: THREE WEEKS AFTER CONCEPTION."

****

April 15, 2:30 a.m: a late spring frost. The temperature has been sinking all night, while outside, the pear and apple and peach blossoms are at their most vulnerable. This year I pruned and composted them and hung out pheromonal traps for coddling moths with particular care. Now that we have a heavy-duty centrifugal juicer, I'd planned on actually trying to have a big harvest of cider this year.

Four a.m: found a Web site at a Michigan State ag school with a chart showing "critical minimum" temperatures for fruit trees at various stages of bud or blossom at risk of frost damage. The lowest among the various categories is twenty-seven degrees. Now, already tonight, the temperature has hit twenty-four, and still sinking.

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In my fifties.

How I'm a hobo. How I practice my so-called "hunter-gatherer" lifestyle, bringing in only occasional trophies, but mostly depend on my wife, her steady work, her goodwill in the world. Old story: poor boy marries classy girl. Brett's father was always a good breadwinner (and as for goodwill in the world, he had an extended network of it). He always had a great-paying job. Barbara never did work. So Brett has no experience of improvident males but yet is patient and forbearing and nonjudgmental and also (here's the thing) unfailingly joyful.

****

Have located a hand-crank coffee grinder ($4.50, at a Goodwill in China Basin). Little wooden drawer below with dovetailed joinery.

An S-curve in the wrought iron crank handle, with porcelain knob. Not only for power outages, but for the practice of ever-more-perfect Environmentalist Kashrut/Sharia. (In case I ever get serious about it.)

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May 10, 2010

Winter's gone. Balmy days. Nico and Aleksandra are living in Dash's old playroom, trying to get a foothold and green-card legitimacy. They've displaced Cavendish, who has gone back to his blind. But he's obliged to come out of the woods every day, dressed and groomed, because he is providing his technical help to an amateur Sondheim production in Grass Valley.

So. Displaced from his bedroom here, what does Cavendish do for his dinners? A Grass Valley supermarket has a "Deli Café" that offers, among the buffalo wings and macaroni salad, two soups du jour, plus chili, in lidded stainless-steel dispensaries. The place also provides wireless Internet, so he can labor over his magnificent e-mails in the evenings. And his appraisal of the chili is: "It's dependable." He was sighted this week at one of those Fiberglass picnic benches out in front of the place, working at his filthy old Apple PowerBook in the twilight, beside an untouched paper bowl of chili—but dozing over his laptop—his forehead coming to rest at last on the keyboard. At this point Cavendish is approaching seventy, though wiry and tireless, and is pretty-much famous in this town.

Then, yesterday we were having a party here, and he showed up. He carried a supermarket bouquet (awarded to Brett as hostess), and a potted supermarket orchid (for the Mother Superior, Barbara, as it was Mother's Day), and took sovereignty of his end of the table, full of happy boasting about Sondheim, *interviewing* his tablemate neighbors in his usual way, condemning as crap the wine we serve here at chez Jones and recommending highly, instead, the bottle Sands had brought, making observations about Sondheim's use of the story structures of fairy tales, even the grisly, gory old chestnuts, especially those ones. The fairy tale, Cavendish says, is all the education we need, as preparation for life. Call kids home from their colleges, retire the liberal arts and sciences, put away the Torah and the

catechism and the 3 R's, and just study fairy tales, squeeze those little turnips for their drops of blood.

****

With Aleksandra here from Krakow, we get a break from my cuisine. Beets and potatoes and cabbage. Bitter rye bread. Mysterious tall ceramic jars with fermenting, souring processes going on. She puts on an apron, ties back her hair.

She immediately took to the garden, too, having arrived at the right moment of spring. On the windowsills stand old egg cartons, each one containing a dozen dollops of black soil, with sprouts expected, destined to be cucumbers, expected in turn to become pickles.

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The veg. garden's elaborate Maginot Line to defend against gophers: galvanized mesh goes three feet underground, ringing the vegetable garden. However, I seem to have walled in at least one gopher, who now lives there, in gopher heaven, dining on the most succulent roots, fresh ones continually transplanted there for his delectation. Brett takes comic pleasure in this fiasco, while I begin to see real insolvency in all my operations.

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Couplings for 1" poly-pipe
Hose clips
Patch copper feeder tube: evaporative cooler
Insect repellent

****

Now a plague of drowned mice in the irrigation system. They pop out slick and bloated at the lower gate in system-flush. Or they meet their end as *paté grotesque*, squashed into sprinkler head, or hose-bib valve.

So I hiked up to the weir and found somebody had left the spring-box's iron lid up. I closed it over and weighted it down with a big stone.

****

June 1

Gutter repair. Replant ruined tomatoes. New tires for Hunter's car. Spray all buildings' foundations with Diazinon solution. Start up irrigation to see what leaks. Sort among my kindling-pile like Croesus, restacking it.

Diazinon has been taken off the market by the EPA, but I'm using up this old brown-glass bottle, bequeathed by George and Ginny, from the cabinet in the potting shed. (I just have to keep it nowhere near meadows or gardens.)

(Regret not having sprayed pears and peaches with dormant solution, as now leaf-curl and canker are attacking leaves.)

****

Sands is back from her teaching job, so Cavendish has moved to her place for his *pied a terre* in her spare room among stacks of fileboxes. Staying in town saves him the long trip on dirt roads at night, to his deep forest fastness. (*At least you're not sleeping under the Pine Street Bridge*, we josh him. Pine Street Bridge is where the orphaned, feral hippie kids from the Ridge sleep.)

Night before last, Sands called from the emergency room to say she couldn't come to our little dinner get-together, because Cavendish had showed up at her door in convulsive pain after a closing-show cast party. Had to be driven in there, vomiting, worrying. She had already spent some hours in the waiting room—no doubt editing some client's novel, manuscript on her knee, cell phone at her side.

Kidney stones were suspected, but he was sent away with a handful of antibiotics and painkillers. Has no insurance, of course. Hasn't had insurance since he dropped out of Yale forty years ago and went to the Woodstock Festival. Was put to bed among Sands's cardboard fileboxes. Maybe it's just a urinary-tract infection.

So yesterday I e-mailed Sands to ask after him, and received this response from her:

He arrived at six this morning saying he was almost out of gas (he meant the truck) and didn't think he'd get home. He'd been striking the Fantasticks *set all day/night. He's currently asleep in the guest room. I was awake when he rolled in—he seemed in good spirits.*

****

June 13, annual Meadow Party, the music fizzles early, but the food is plentiful, the summer air warm, the little kids rage in the dark woods all night unsupervised, far from the bonfire, with their glowsticks, like goblins. Amy Tan has brought an iPod containing reproductions of birdcalls, and the following morning she has set it up behind the cottage, driving local birds to confusion, sending amplified calls into the trees. David Lukas arrived with a large pail full of morels he found around the North Fork of the Yuba. One day later, linguni for twelve, ON MY NEW BRICK FLOOR.

****

June 16, 2010, move to Squaw.
Snow still in hard drifts on the north slopes. The creek thunders all night long. The paths up the creek are strewn with snowload-felled trees. A sheet of blown-away plywood lies on our hillside. In the valley meadow: the chickadee's *chirrrrr*.

After sixty-one years, in sashes and jambs, wood starts losing its grip on the old hardware. However, during the same sixty-one years (esp. on west-facing exterior walls), the beauty of unpainted redwood's grain intensifies, a red-golden toasty corduroy, a woodgrain big-as-matchsticks, scorched in the grooves, radiant blushing from the many sunsets it has faced down.

I think of Oakley on these summer afternoons as I work, slot-head screwdriver in hand, brown paper bag of shiny new brass screws by my knee. Oakley used to say with a chuckle wherein all mortality and futility are foreseen, "Yeah, you just keep putting in longer screws."

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June 21—My agent calls with good news. Counterpoint Press, hardcover, lead title on spring list. This agent, of lo these twenty years, her patience and forgiveness make me think of some "Higher Power," or is that just her?

****

End of June 2010. Hunter and Nico tear down the old shed on the south side of the upper house. Little pre-fab cedar barn, a kit, purchased no doubt from some hardware store's parking lot. Crappy two-by-two construction, the whole structure goes down in a single morning under their blows. Again, Granite Chief and Squaw Peak are in view.

****

That "Just keep putting in longer screws" joke was, on the irony scale, exactly like Oakley's similar remark about a novelist sustaining his career over the years: "Just lower your standards and keep on going," he liked to say. (But the irony there isn't quite as darkly acquainted with the deep, full, liberating ocean of futility and mortality. Because I really think he half meant it.)

****

On the topic of the big antiabortion billboard in SFO proclaiming the heartbeats of embryos. Which has been on my mind.

Those pro-lifers might be interested to know: an embryonic heartbeat is, strictly speaking, a half-heartbeat. In utero, only two heart chambers pump blood, not the full complement of four chambers. Until it's born and takes its first gasp, a fetus's lungs are collapsed, as is half of the heart. So that little heart is a prototype engine.

[Liberal tho' I am, I find it hard to be entirely unsympathetic to "pro-lifers." If you really believed that our louche society casually murders unborn babies *en masse*, then it makes sense that you might be alarmed as we think the average German citizen ought to have been, during the days when people were being removed to death camps systematically, rationally, discreetly, judiciously, hygenically.]

****

Suppose you want to suggest that a fetus isn't "alive" yet, because it isn't really human until it's conscious. Or aware. You want to say that "conscious awareness" is what's lacking in a fetus. The thing will continue to be only like a sort of unconscious kidney, or abscess, or loaf, until it is "breathed-into" by enlightenment, filled with ideas and perceptions.

Well, if you define the beginning of life as "consciousness" or "awareness," then the larger question, is: Did Life Ever Begin?

Has It Begun Yet?

****

June in Squaw. The book biz.

Pulled out an old book from the Annex bookshelves, and wow. The first chapter announces a great writer: Sara Vogan: her 1981 novel *In Shelley's Leg*.

According to the jacket copy she was, in 1981, teaching creative writing in Milwaukee.

Only a few pages in, I want to send her a note of collegial admiration—if the rest of the book can carry on like this, then there's another really good novelist in my generation. Or send a note to her agent, to be forwarded. Maybe invite her out to run workshops.

So I Googled her name. The first two "hits" on Google were, of course, younger, newer Sara Vogans on Facebook. But the third one read: "Sara Vogan, 43, Dies—Novelist and Teacher—Obituary—NYTimes.com."

The dateline on the story was 1991, ten years after *In Shelley's Leg* was published. She "was found dead, at her home in San Francisco. There were no immediate survivors." Cause of death had not been released pending coroner's toxicology report.

****

June 2010.

For Barbara at her age now, just to get up out of a chair and cross a room is an adventure requiring courage and strategy and resolve, as well as a clear prevision of wreck. I compare her tribulations—pains, embarrassments and inconveniences, and the prospect of good-ol' death always ahead—with ten-year-old Dashiell's tribulations (we tend to forget the miseries and anguishes of children, for whom the prospect of *life* looms ahead; which, too, is a room to be crossed at peril). And I'm frankly not entirely sure which form of tribulations I'd pick for myself, if I had a choice.

Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

****

August 18, 2010.

Back home in Nevada City, end of summer. The air is heavier down here than at the high elevations, more humid, and a cobwebby smell of home permeates the woods. The garden is late: tomatoes all unripe. Another "zilch" year for pears. Rodents have eaten through the line providing electricity to my trailer (an orange 100-ft. extension cord on the forest floor, originating in the pumphouse, which is the nearest juice).

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The trailer under the oaks. The windows crank open, against the strands of summer-spiders' architecture. Those spiders now grown and gone. The heavy-metal space heater still works, making its strange elephant-trumpeting noise in waking up and electrocuting its toaster coils. The usual rodent shit all over the desk and the trailer's sink and the three-burner stovetop. Each birch-veneered drawer (I slide each open) is filled up with a mouse nest, so it's like an apartment building. Which I just leave alone. I slide each drawer back in place. The little plastic tray of d-Con bait, heaped levelly with minty-green pellets, is at my elbow, as always. My fingertips are so calloused from handling my ten thousand old bricks, their touch won't stimulate my laptop's trackpad, which doesn't recognize the electrostatic touch of skin.

****

September: Mowing largest meadow, I feel fat raindrops on my forearms, but I keep on mowing. The wind picks up. On hood of tractor, wet freckles evaporate fast.

****

Fall 2010. Good to be back from Squaw, back in my trench. Hunter will be leaving soon for his sophomore year, and Dash is back in school: fifth grade. I'm in my fifties now.

A month ago in July, Dash and I played miniature golf—at the same old place as ever, along a shabby tourist-strip boulevard by the lake. Most cherished and dorkiest of mini-golf courses, its old green felt shrinking away from the cement channels, its girl dispensing scorecards across her windowsill with open boxes of Baby Ruths and Butterfingers, its course's plywood obstacles (Indian chiefs, clown-mouths, eightballs) hand-carpentered and hand-painted, richly varnished, by an old man in the 1950s, unrenovated over a half century.

An increasingly important reward of having had children: During this our brief hallucinatory witness among clouds of apparent particles endowed with "mass" and "energy," in the midst of the ongoing, rumored Big Bang, if we have fostered biological children, *then we have actually taken a dip into "matter."*

We haven't just groped spectrally through the particle swarm for a few decades. We seem to have augmented the whole thing by a few pounds. It's kind of a great metaphysical event. Apparently, there will be consequences to our (apparent) existence, in the form of the continuity of the mystical thing flesh.

What made me think of this: the scorecard from eighteen holes of mini-golf (actually thirty-six holes; we went around twice) is still riding in my car's door pocket with suntan lotion and candy-bar wrappers and replacement bulbs for the dashboard display. The rainy, cold, snowy season will come, and there will be many pick-ups and drop-offs at school, and that paper scorecard will go on riding along indefinitely.

****

(November. Dumped-on by snow, at six thousand-foot elevation.) Dash will be ten years old soon, and today he went out alone carrying a few paper dollars he'd earned, to walk all the way, by himself, to the store to buy a toy with his own money. Sun has melted all the snow on the roads, which are now shining-wet. He has been given his mother's cell phone, lodged deep in his jeans pocket, and been instructed to call home when he arrives at the store. He has been warned to stay far to the side of the road "if a car comes," and he's dressed warmly. All around him, as he walks alone by himself, the world will be shining as it only does in mornings of fast snowmelt and blue sky. Pine boughs will be dropping their ladlefuls of white.

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Clear sky all night. Stars are pebbles at the floor of the stream. Before sunrise, on the high old-snow places (Squaw Peak, Granite Chief, KT-22) snowcaps come up as violet first. Then peach.

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November 17, 2010
Tracy arrives with elk in her luggage, frozen hunk.
(*epicurious.com* counsels disguising it with sauces; fatiguing it by many hours in slow cooker.)

The misery of the hunter. Tracy says the guy who shot it—then, miles from his truck, knelt before the carcass with his knife for the winter afternoon's work—got himself a hernia in the long process of dressing it.

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[I'm getting the sense there's a white-trash aristocracy: ALL of my male friends up here have had at least one hernia operation.]

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Fantasy: The entire American population adds woolly socks and dumpy sweatshirts to their bedtime costume. The *immediate* result: eleven thousand hectares of rainforest per year are saved.

****

. . . For the high and the next way thither is run by desires, and not by paces of feet.
—The Cloud of Unknowing, fourteenth c.

****

Far out Newtown Road, there's always been a big hand-lettered sign:

For Sale, Thirty-two-plus Acres
Three Buildings on Four Separate Parcels
Well and Creek
OLD MAN READY TO DEAL

It stands illegibly deep in bluebells, lupine, Scotch broom, wild lilac.

My Former Skip, Jackson

A Letter from Count Michael Florescu of Light Years Farm, Avoca, Wisconsin

DEAR DRANO,

This is taking a leaf from your book, sorry, but I pray you refrain from addressing me as "Count," I'm simply a bird of passage living off the crumbs of others and Florescu is spelled sans e.

At this very moment Indian Summer is in full fig and of course we would love to have a visitation. Can't guarantee how long this weather will last, though.

My essay in that anthology *Art & Death* is truncated—edited out was a pretty interesting evening spent with Richard Tuttle, so that the entire piece forms a sidelight on the ascendency and death throes of abstract expressionism and minimalism in New York in the late seventies.

Argentina seems like a brilliant idea. PLEASE tell me more. A major incentive to my being fit to travel. Things are a little improved every day.

And now I want to tell you about Jackson.

The night prior to my being admitted to hospital this last time, I was, literally—climbing the walls and screaming in my attempts to get sufficient oxygen.

I was climbing the walls because I had woken and been unable to find the light on my bedside table. I was unable, actually, to locate the table. Then I tried locating the switch on the wall controlling the overhead light. Couldn't put my hands on it. I screamed some more,

and discovered I was in a storefront run by Chinese mobsters. They specialized in two items—some very arcane electronic devices as well as preserved meat and fish. Having no freezers, they preserved the esculents in thick layers of lard (a workable alternative to freezing, actually.)

I was not threatened, nonetheless I became truculent. I was truculent on account of my powerlessness. "What do you want from me?" I thundered. "I have no money and no ID."

The mobsters acted conciliatory. They escorted me to the door and I took as deep a series of breaths as I could, and then it started to rain and I found myself at the gates of death—more accurately at the flight of heavy stone steps that lead to the Gates. There was a curlicued iron railing set into the steps. I grasped the railing and stumbled around it hoping to find shelter from the falling rain. The most unbearable physical situation I know is being caught in the rain without head covering and the rain beats your head and the rain and shit trickles down the back of your neck.

Untoward encounters with people you hate and fear are doubtless more unpleasant, but people can be avoided. The rain cannot.

In any event, I'm seeking shelter from it, when someone appears at my side with a giant umbrella, which he holds above me. It is the doorman, the commissionaire, or as we call such an individual in New York, the concierge. I look with gratitude into his face and say: "Thank you Jackson. I haven't seen you for ages. What've you been doing with yourself?"

Jackson was the Trinity College servant I shared with a bunch of other young gentlemen, undergraduates. At Oxford they were known, I believe, as scouts. At Trinity College, Dublin, as "skips".

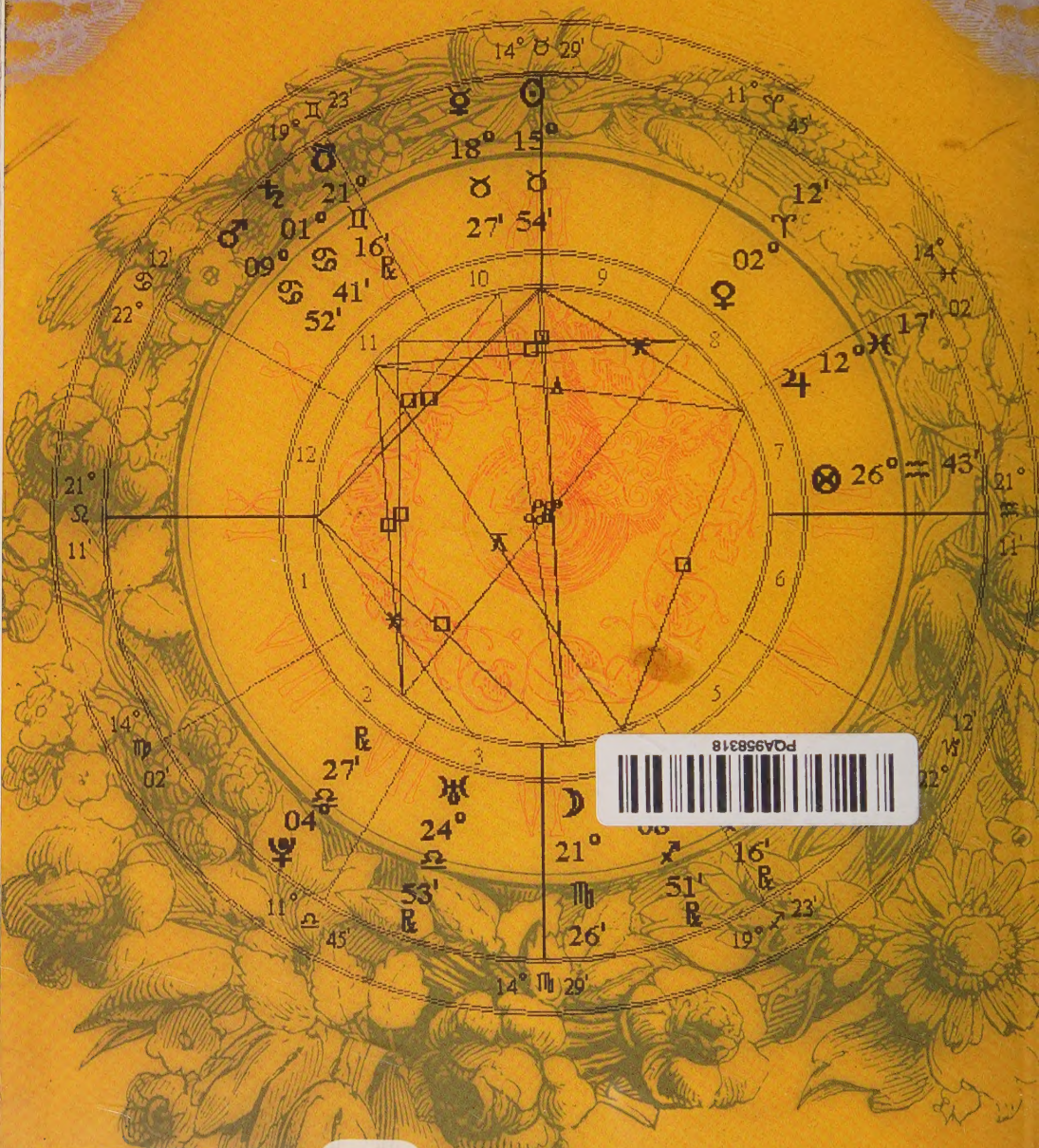
The rooms we lived in there were at 11 Botany Bay. Those rooms had formerly harbored Oscar Wilde and later, Bram Stoker.

Returning to the quotidian continues to discombobulate, but learning to live with proximity of death concentrates the mind very powerfully, and as I mentioned earlier, I'm progressing a bit every day now.

Despite my introductory waspishness, I greatly appreciate your concern.

Best to you,
Michael

"It created a pattern that she didn't recognize." (from **Say Please** by C. I. Shelton) "Shift manager at the idiotically named Copy Copy, her thirtieth birthday coming soon—she was kicking ass." (from **Jump** by Ann Packer) "She had a cat, which sometimes darted into the hall when the door was open. A skinny young cat of a startling, refined beauty, with a pointed little muzzle and magnificent eyes: Audrey Hepburn transformed by a spell." (from **Curiosity** by Sigrid Nunez) "But she's what she calls a stylist. I gave up on her *Planets* magazine column after the third one. I got stuck on the opening line: 'All time travel is essentially Oedipal.'" (from **Bring on the Dancing Horses** by Ed Park)



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